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WITH NERVES AS STEADY AND TRUE AS STEEL, DAINTY LANCE COVERED THE HOUND AND FIRED.

Dainty Lance,

THE BOY SPORT;

OR,

The Bank-Breakers' Decoy Duck.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "YELLOWSTONE JACK," "HURRICANE BILL," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE DECOY DUCK.

WHIT-whit-whit-tu-WHOO-oo-o!

Only the weird, peculiar notes of the lesser horned owl, but the traveler abruptly reined in his horse and turning half-way round in the saddle, cast a keen glance into the darkness from whence the sound proceeded, and through which he had just ridden.

Not that the night-bird or its melancholy yet far from disagreeable plaint were uncommon at that hour when twilight deepens into nightfall, for already the young traveler had caught brief glimpses of more than one of the birds as they flitted past on silent wing, and listened to their droning call; but his trained ear told him that there was a difference in this last call from the others—that it was either a poor imitation, or else uttered by a badly demoralized owl.

His years were those of a boy, his experience that of a man. He was in a portion of a then border State where life was lightly valued, and this uncertain cadence, which would have escaped an ordinary ear, put him upon his guard at once.

The sound had scarcely died away, when another and more startling cry came to his ears—the shrill scream of a woman in bodily danger or terror.

The first came from the rear, the second from in advance, apparently just around an abrupt bend in the road, only a few yards ahead of the horseman.

He was young, courageous, and endowed with more than an ordinary share of that chivalry which ranks women but little if any below the angels. He forgot the suspicions aroused by the cry of the owl, and with a clear shout of encouragement, he plied his spurs and dashed around the curve in the road.

The moon was nearing its full, and on this evening shone brightly down upon a short stretch of road where the heavy growth of timber had given place to a matted mass of sumac and hazel bushes, bound together with blackberry briars and other brambles.

The silvery light fell upon a tableau that told its own story: The form of a woman struggling in the grasp of two men who, with fierce, angry curses, were endeavoring to drag their captive from the road into the dense undergrowth out of which they had pounced upon her when that ill-omened cry broke the peaceful solitude.

The keen-eyed traveler took all this in at a glance, and without a thought of the possible danger to himself, he drew a revolver from its

holster and uttered an encouraging shout as he hastened to the rescue.

As though that cry, which told of coming assistance, had lent her the necessary degree of strength, the woman broke away from her assailants with a force that caused one to fall headlong—the other ruffian making a desperate snatch at her, which was only foiled by his striking his foot against and stumbling at full length over his prostrate fellow—and ran swiftly down the road toward the horseman.

In this she appeared to be acting blindly, rather than through calculation, since the traveler was forced to wrench up his horse until its quivering haunches almost touched the ground, lest he should ride over the terrified fugitive, who paused only when her outstretched hands fairly brushed the animal's breast.

In this brief space, the two ruffians had scrambled to their feet, and with fierce oaths of vengeful rage, were starting in pursuit of their fleeing prey, when they hesitated at the sight of this new actor upon the scene.

That the latter was a bold player, was quickly made manifest.

Steadying himself as well as possible under the existing circumstances, he discharged two shots, in swift succession at the enemy.

A fierce, snarling cry told that at least one of these bullets had its billet, and the nearest of the two ruffians made an angry leap forward, bent on revenge, but his mate grasped him by the arm and forced him back under cover.

"They will murder you—we must flee for our lives!"

Even in that moment of excitement the horseman noticed how musical was the voice which uttered these words, and as he glanced downward, the clear moonlight gave him a glimpse of a young face in perfect accord with the tones—but only a glimpse.

A small, brown hand closed upon the bridle-rein, and the spirited horse was turned sharply around as though on a pivot, then, with a movement that was active grace itself, a small foot rested upon his instep for a moment, and then a warm arm clasped him round the waist, as the girl settled herself on the horse behind him.

"Not now," she breathed, hurriedly. "They will shoot you down as you attempt to pass them, or will steal along under cover and shoot you here. Death for you, and a worse fate for me!"

It was her heel that urged the horse along the back-trail, out of the moonlight and into the dense shadows where the tree-tops closed in a somber arch over the road. But the horseman raised no objections, either in words or by actions, simply saying:

"Where do you want to go? back to town? We are wholly at your disposal—my horse and I."

"Ride fast for a few moments—let them think that we are hastening to town, and they will give over the chase," quickly responded the young woman.

The willing horse dashed on for a few rods at full speed, then at a word from the woman, was checked.

"We have lost them now," she added, but with an undercurrent of anxiety in her voice

that she failed to conceal. "I don't think there is any more danger. And I am taking you out of your road—"

"No," said the traveler, quietly. "My road is the same as yours, until you are once more safe with your friends. This is a rough country for a woman to be journeying through, alone and after dark. Just consider me a brother, and make use of me as such, until you find a more suitable guardian."

This was said with a laugh, but there was something in his voice that would have reassured a far more timid creature than she who was perched behind him.

"Then—brother—turn into that path to the right; it will take us to my—our relatives. And as we go, I will tell you how I came to fall into the trouble from which you so bravely rescued me."

"Not unless you are perfectly willing," said the traveler, turning his horse into the narrow path indicated.

"Why should I not? There should be no concealments between brother and sister. But first, a brother should know his sister's name. I am Myrtle Fair."

"The first should be last, or the moonlight back yonder spoke falsely, Fair Myrtle," laughingly uttered the traveler.

"Bah! had I said Gypsy Brown there might have been some truth in the conceit," but even as she spoke, a little thrill was sent along the arm that encompassed the traveler's waist, that told him his words had not seriously offended her ears. "The moonlight fell upon your face, as well, and I saw—what, no doubt, many another girl has told you. I like to be original, and so cut the words short; you can finish the compliment according to your own fancy, brother—"

"Lance—Lancelot Daintree, sister Myrtle."

"Or Dainty Lance—the name suits you well for fair weather, and is as good as though you had backed it up with a baptismal certificate."

There was a touch of mockery in these words, as well as in the short laugh which accompanied them, and for the first time Dainty Lance—to accept the *sobriquet* bestowed upon him by the girl he had so strangely encountered—began to suspect that he was not acting quite as prudently as he might.

The unnatural call of the horned owl recurred to him, and he could not help thinking that his fair companion was strangely self-possessed for a young woman who had so recently met with a terrible adventure.

That hoot may have been a signal—the scene in the moonlighted road but a preconcerted affair—instead of a maiden in distress, his fair charge might be a decoy, leading him to robbery.

Thus far Lance thought, then dismissed the ideas from his mind with the carelessness of a young and fearless heart.

It seemed as though Myrtle divined his doubts, for her bantering manner instantly changed, and she once more became the tender creature whom he had rescued from a terrible peril. Her arm clasped his waist less firmly, and there was a faint tremulousness in her voice as she spoke;

"I forgot for a moment where I was, and all that had happened. I forgot, too, that you are a stranger. My calling you brother, seemed to carry me back to the time when my real brother—but there! My nerves are so agitated and unstrung that I hardly know what I am saying."

Nevertheless, she had power of will sufficient to push aside these reminiscences of the past, and give a clear and succinct account of the events which had led to her encountering that awkward adventure.

Her relatives had come to Missouri from Georgia, in search of a new and more comfortable home. From St. Louis they had journeyed this far in wagons, pausing from time to time in order to search for a pleasant location, and they were now taking one of these breathing spells, only a mile or two from where Dainty Lance had so nobly risked his life.

She had ridden into town, that afternoon, to post a letter and make a few little purchases, but when she was ready to start on her return, her horse was missing. Whether stolen or only strayed, she failed to learn, though she spent the remainder of daylight in the effort.

She started for her home—if a woodland camp could be called home—and was surprised by the two brutal ruffians from whose evil hands his timely approach freed her.

She used many more words in making these explanations, than are recorded here, and during it all, Dainty Lance was on the keen lookout for a plausible peg on which to hang the suspicion already alluded to, but without success.

Lance began to feel a little ashamed of his suspicions, and to make amends, went to the other extreme, soon putting his fair companion wholly at her ease, and any one hearing them as they rode along, chatting gayly, would have deemed them lifelong friends if not lovers.

Myrtle seemed wonderfully well acquainted with the land before them, considering she was little better than a stranger in that section, and though she laughed a little incredulously when Lance declared that he was wholly at sea regarding their present whereabouts, she assumed the office of guide, passing from one path to another without the faintest trace of doubt or hesitation:

At length she said, with a half-sigh:

"Our journey is almost at an end. Some of them must have heard us before now."

"I can see no light—no trace of an encampment."

"We are obliged to be prudent. You know what the country is; how thick and daring the horse-thieves are. We have some fine stock, and needs to be jealously guarded."

"They must have heard our approach, and have hidden or extinguished the fire. I must give them the signal, or we may meet with a warmer reception than we care for!"

She slipped from the horse to the ground, and gave utterance to a cry that brought back his suspicion like a flash—for it was the peculiar note of the horned owl!

The next instant a screen of blankets was torn down from around a fire, upon which a handful of hay was cast, while the bright glare

of a bull's-eye lantern was turned full upon his face, almost blinding him.

Mechanically he grasped his revolvers, but a soft, warm hand instantly rested upon his, and a well known voice uttered the words:

"Have no fear—these are my friends, and yours!"

No doubt these words were not without their influence, but as Lance gradually recovered the use of his eyes, he saw enough to tell him that if evil was really intended, he was helplessly entrapped.

He saw that he was surrounded by armed men, nine in all, or all that were then visible.

They were all rugged, resolute-looking fellows, not especially calculated to shine in society, but awkward antagonists in a hand-to-hand struggle for life and liberty.

A single glance showed him this, and with a ready coolness far beyond his years, Lance accepted the situation, relaxing his grasp upon his pistols, and leisurely alighting.

"Take the gentleman's horse, Abe," said a tall, rough-clad, but far from unhandsome man stepping forward.

"It's a rather peculiar reception, this, stranger, but when you have been bothered as much with horse-thieves as we have, you will understand it better.

"No offense taken where none is meant, I assure you," replied Dainty Lance with a careless grace. "But I will not trouble you so far. Now that Miss Fair is among friends, I must not forget that I have an appointment in Howard—"

"At any rate, you must wait until I have spoken with father—he must thank you," said Myrtle, gently drawing the bridle-reins from his hand and motioning the man who had advanced at the order to lead the animal away.

All this might easily be only a natural hospitality, but though the youth made no objection, he felt more and more confident that all was not as it should be.

With the one exception of the tall man whom Myrtle called father, the men looked more like horse-thieves than honest emigrants. And such, if not more, he set them down in his own mind, even while resolving to make the best of a bad affair, and meet cunning with cunning.

With one exception, the men seemed good-natured and even particularly glad to see him; that exception, a short, powerfully built young man, dark and handsome as a Gypsy, only gave him short, surly responses, and Lance smiled quietly as he saw how often the moody fellow turned his eyes toward the spot where Myrtle Fair was earnestly conversing with her father.

"So-ho!" was his inaudible comment. "A jealous lover!"

In this conclusion he was correct, but before he could pursue his observations further, Myrtle's father, whose name was Edward Fair, came forward and warmly grasped his hand.

"My daughter has told me all, and I hardly know how to find words to thank you—"

"Then the best way would be not to try," interposed Lance with an easy laugh. "And I have been more than repaid for the little I did, by the pleasure of making her acquaintance, and our ride hither."

"You are as generous as you are brave, Mr.—"

"Lancelot Daintree is my name, sir."

The speaker paused, amazed at the effect of his announcement. If he had introduced himself as his Satanic Majesty, the consternation written upon the faces about him could have been no greater.

But then the Gypsy-looking fellow strode forward and said:

"You lie, curse you! Your name is Harry Ballou!"

The next moment his heels flew up, and his head struck the earth.

CHAPTER II.

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY.

THERE was nothing mysterious about this sudden overthrow of the Gypsy-looking fellow, for even he saw it coming, though unable to escape the prompt retort to his fiery accusation.

Dainty Lance made one step forward as the jealous lover confronted him, thus bending the whole weight of his body to the swift, right-handed lunge that caught his insulter off his guard and knocked him so cleanly off his legs.

The stroke sounded sharp and clear as the crack of a whip, and those standing nearest the young stranger, involuntarily drew back a pace or two, as though unwilling to receive a like compliment.

Dainty Lance cast a quick glance around him, but if he was looking for an avenue of escape, he must have seen that they were all closed, unless he chose to run the risk of dealing with powder and lead.

Though fearless and daring to a fault, Lance was nobody's fool. He saw that he had been decoyed to this lonely spot for some ulterior purpose, and he knew that, did they choose to so exert their power, his life was wholly at their disposal.

Tough as a knot, the Gypsy-looking young man quickly scrambled to his feet, and drawing a long, venomous-looking knife, would have hurled himself upon Lance, only for the prompt action of Edward Fair.

"Easy, Dan Rowe!" he cried, authoritatively, his voice coming deep from his chest. "Put up your weapon and bottle your wrath, or you'll have to deal with Hammer Fair!"

Nor were his words unsupported by actions. His heavy hand closed upon the angry fellow's shoulder with a power that held him motionless.

"He struck me—I'll have his heart's blood for that blow!" snarled Rowe, his eyes glowing like those of an infuriated wild beast.

"He served you right—"

"Don't spoil the gentleman's sport," interposed Dainty Lance, with a cool insolence that proved even more stinging than his words. "Give him his head, and I promise to convince you all that he is the liar he accused me of being."

Hammer Fair turned his head sharply and addressed, not Dainty Lance, but his men.

"Close in on him, but remember what he is worth—"

He paused amazed. A light form darted

past him and took up its position beside Dainty Lance, a cocked revolver glistening in the red rays of the camp-fire.

It was his daughter, whose voice rung out sharply:

"Keep your places, all! This gentleman is under my protection, and any hand lifted against him is raised against me!"

"You see what comes of trusting a silly, romantic fool like Duck?" grated Rowe, wresting his arm free from the grasp of the astonished father. "I was against it from the first, but you wouldn't hearken to reason. His doll's face has made a fool of the girl—but he shall never live to boast of it! I'll cut his heart out!"

With a snarling curse he leaped forward, his knife uplifted, but then paused and involuntarily recoiled.

No single man could have cowed him, but the girl whom he loved with all the power of his fiery, impetuous nature, confronted him with leveled revolver, stern determination written in every feature, as she cried:

"Back, Daniel Rowe! back, or by all the powers above I'll cool your mad blood by a bullet through the brain! Back, I say!"

Dainty Lance stood a quiet and apparently wholly disinterested spectator of the wild, peculiar scene.

He knew now that his first suspicions had been well-founded; that he had been decoyed thither through a cunning scheme, for some evil purpose.

The few words that had already been spoken, taken in connection with the amazement with which the leader of the party received the announcement of his name, told the quick-witted youth that he had probably been mistaken for somebody else. And believing this, he decided upon a bold, daring course of action.

With a quick, dexterous motion he grasped the pistol held by the girl, in such a manner as to prevent its explosion when wrested from her grasp, saying:

"Many thanks, Miss Fair, but I am not used to hide behind a petticoat when danger threatens me. If you please, I'll manage my part of this affair after my own fashion."

At the same time Hammer Fair, as he had termed himself, once more seized the jealous lover, growling:

"Make another offer like that, and I'll have you tied up, hand and foot, like a runaway schoolboy! Can't you wait until we've got the truth out of him? Are we to lose all our time and trouble, just because you have taken a fool notion into your head? By the horns of the devil! I'm getting sick of your infernal temper."

Perhaps it was this explosion of rage, or it may have been the action of the fair decoy that influenced Rowe. She appeared mortally offended by the cavalier manner in which Dainty Lance had treated her defense of him, and flounced away, her face burning hot. Let the cause be what it might, the angry lover immediately cooled down and returning his knife to its sheath, shook his arm free, and leaned against an adjacent tree-trunk.

Lance coolly uncocked the weapon left in his hand by his offended defender, but still retain-

ed possession of it while addressing Hammer Fair.

"You have a peculiar way of welcoming visitors. Do you insist upon furnishing every man a name of your own choosing, and then try to murder him in case he doesn't fancy the substitute?"

"Dan did act the fool, but you gave us a false name," responded Fair.

"Dan did act the fool—I grant you that. He called me a hairy baboon, or something of the sort—"

"Harry Ballou—your real name—we know you too well to be mistaken," interposed the other, sharply.

"My name is not Harry Ballou—never was—never will be. I am Lancelot Daintree! I never even heard of the person you are mistaking me for, before to-night."

The youth spoke deliberately, but with a rising flush on his smooth, girlish cheek that betokened a growing impatience.

Hammer Fair stared at him steadily. The men interchanged quick glances. The fair decoy drew a little nearer while a short, mocking laugh came from Rowe's lips.

"We all have eyes and can see. He thinks to bluff his way clear. But what's the use of wasting so much time in idle talk? Truss him up to a tree and try a dose of hickory-oil!"

From the murmur which came from the other men, it was clear that this blunt speech found an echo in their hearts, and Hammer Fair made use of the hint.

"You will have only yourself to blame if it comes to that, young man. For my part, I wish to treat you as generously as possible, consistent with the end we have in view. But you were decoyed here that we might glean some important information from you. Speak out plainly. Tell us what we wish to know, and as soon as we can do so with safety to ourselves, you shall be set at liberty, to go where you will. Refuse—be obstinate, and you shall be *made* to speak out."

During this deliberate speech, the brain of the youth addressed was more active than ever.

He saw that they were fully convinced that he was the person called Harry Ballou, and he made up his mind to accept the position, though not so suddenly as to arouse their suspicions.

"I have told you my name. If you don't choose to believe me, all right. That will not alter the truth. After all, I am not particular. Though a stranger in this State, there are portions of the country where my name is rather too well known for comfort or safety. I'll make a bargain with you.

"I frankly own that I am what is vulgarly known as 'on the make'—nor am I over-particular about details so long as the pay is good. And, unless I mistake, you all pull oars in the same boat. I can scent horse-dealers in the air—"

"Do you take us for horse-thieves?" sharply cried Fair.

"If I have mistaken your line of business, I ask pardon," resumed Dainty Lance, with a graceful wave of his hand. "You may be road-agents, train-wreckers or bank-breakers; but that you are not of the fools called honest men, it needs no gift of prophecy to divine."

"Curse such nonsense!" cried Rowe, angrily. "Bring him to the point, Hammer Fair, or else turn him over to me."

"Take him at his word, and when I have thrashed him soundly, he'll know better than to speak when gentleman are talking," coolly uttered the strange youth.

Swift as a panther leaping upon its long-watched-for prey, Daniel Rowe, fairly beside himself with rage, whipped forth his knife and darted upon his enemy. But the youngster had not spoken so confidently without possessing the ability to back up his words, and with an agile motion he evaded the descending blow, slipping under Rowe's arm, kicking his feet from beneath him, and at the same time dealing him a blow with the fist beneath the ear, so powerful that the fellow lay where he fell quivering like an ox felled in the shambles.

The fair decoy had started forward at the onset, but was too late to interfere before her lover was overthrown.

"Tinker," she cried, sternly, "take away his weapons and stand by him. If he attempts to make any more trouble, tie him hand and foot. I order you."

"Do as Duck says," uttered Fair, then turning toward Dainty Lance with a still sterner air than before: "And you would do well to take a lesson by him. This is no child's play. We have taken a great deal of pains to get you into our power, and we mean to be paid for our trouble and risk."

"Beyond a horse and a few dollars in money—for I have no more—I don't see where your pay is to come from," laughed Lance, easily.

"You play your part well, but luckily we have taken all necessary precautions. We can easily prove that you are the bird we intended to trap. And to prove what I say—Abe Tinker!"

The man addressed turned his head, but did not leave Rowe, who was just beginning to recover his senses after that crushing stroke.

"Who is this young man? What is his name?"

"The son o' the banker in Clayton. He pays out the money. They call him Harry Ballou," was the prompt reply.

One by one the other men were asked the same question, and each one returned substantially the same answer.

"That should satisfy you that we know you, and that any further attempts to throw dust in our eyes will be labor spent in vain," added Fair, triumphantly.

During this interval, the brain of the youth had been busily at work, and he decided upon the course he should follow. Whether wisely or not, future events were to show.

"Mind you," he said, slowly, "I don't admit that you are right. I don't say that I am Harry Ballou. But supposing I am, what right have you to decoy me here?"

"The right of might, I reckon," laughed Fair, evidently highly pleased by the turn affairs had taken. "But you need not be uneasy. You have nothing to fear beyond a brief detention—provided you are frank and truthful in your answers to a few questions."

"What are they?" demanded Lance, shortly.

"Purely in the line of business. We are thinking of opening a bank, and as you are a professional, you can give us a few hints, perhaps," chuckled Fair.

"It is my turn to say—come to the point."

"Very well. In the first place, how much money has your father got in his bank—in round numbers?"

"You mean Mr. Ballou? I can't say, exactly, because I don't know. But no doubt there is more than he can well afford to lose," was the calm response.

"But not more than we can afford to win! And win it we shall, for you must tell us how the bank is secured; how the safe or vault is easiest opened; what shape the money is in; whether the building is guarded inside or out on Sunday—to-morrow. In short, you must help us all you can to do this work—"

This eager speech was cut short by a cry from no great distance, an imitation of the hoot of an owl, even less natural than that which had first aroused the suspicions of Dainty Lance. And quickly following the signal, an old man rushed out from the darkness, the very picture of angry rage and disappointment.

His clothes were torn and soiled; his hat was gone, revealing a round head entirely destitute of hair. In figure lean and wrinkled, in face a human vulture.

"Bald Bisbee!" cried Hammer Fair. "What the dogs has gone wrong now?"

"Everything!" gasped the old man, pointing a trembling claw at Dainty Lance. "You've got the wrong man—that ain't Harry Ballou! He passed me in the road—he has escaped us! Curses on the foul luck!"

CHAPTER III.

ANOTHER LINK IN THE CHAIN.

HARRY BALLOU was the only son of Pierce Ballou, sole owner of the one banking-house which graced the solid little tower of Clayton.

The old gentleman laid the foundation of his present comfortable fortune by co-operating with Pierre Choteau, the giant of the Western fur trade, but when silk and felt began to overshadow beaver, Ballou sold out and finally located in Clayton, where he set his thousands to breeding tens of thousands.

But our business is not so much with him, as with his son, Harry Ballou.

This young man served as cashier in his father's bank, and was to be admitted as a full partner into the concern on the day he attained his majority.

That glad day—for more reasons than one—was only a few months distant in the future; and if ever a youth appeared to be the favorite of fortune, Harry Ballou was that individual.

Not only would he come into a well-established business, with a large income, but on the same day he was to wed with fair Rose Harvey—and it would be hard to find another young fellow who was more thoroughly deserving of such a double stroke of good fortune.

But evil eyes were enviously fixed upon the bank and the wealth it contained, and after a long dallying with temptation, Bald Bisbee en-

tered into communication with Edward Fair, whom he had been intimate with in days gone by, and set the train in motion that was to startle the entire country, and furnish the material for this story.

The old sinner did his work thoroughly, as far as lay in his power. Having no funds with which to open a banking account, he could learn nothing definite concerning the interior arrangements or workings of the bank.

Rose Harvey lived in Howard, a small town a dozen or more miles from Clayton, and ever since their engagement it was the custom of Harry Ballou to ride over there on Saturday evenings, returning on Monday morning in time to occupy his place in the bank.

It was Bald Bisbee's idea to waylay and capture Harry Ballou while on his way to visit his lady-love; to extort, by torture if other means failed, the information deemed essential to the complete success of their plans; then to break into the bank on Saturday or Sunday night. But it was Myrtle Fair—or "Duck," as she was better known among her friends, the nickname being a very common one in Missouri and other Southern States—who elaborated the idea, on learning that Harry Ballou was a brave, chivalrous youth. There can be but little doubt concerning the complete success of her adroit planning, had not an unforeseen event preserved Harry Ballou from the snare into which his "double" fell.

At the usual hour Harry left the bank and hastened home to prepare for his customary trip, while Bald Bisbee hurried out of town to make sure that his ambushade was properly placed.

Had the old sinner been a few minutes later, the whole course of this record would have been changed, and Dainty Lance might have pursued his journey without interruption from the bank-breakers, for in that brief space of time it was known through the town that the fine, half-bred horse belonging to Harry Ballou had either strayed or been stolen.

A brisk search was set on foot, a fair reward offered for the missing animal, for it was a high favorite with the banker's son, and in hopes of its being found in time for his journey, he waited until dark. Then, hearing nothing favorable, he prepared another horse and set out on his ride, being then four miles behind Lancelot Daintree.

He had scarcely cleared the outskirts of Clayton when he met a citizen of Howard with whom he was well acquainted. This was John Steuben, a well-to-do farmer, a horse-dealer, and the chief of the Vigilance Committee, organized expressly for the purpose of hunting down and stringing up the numerous horse-thieves that infested the State.

This man had long coveted and often sought to either trade for or purchase Harry's favorite horse, and had been laughingly given the refusal of the animal. He at once accosted Harry, in no very good humor, charging him with breaking his word, since he had met a stranger riding that very horse, only a few minutes before.

"I jest ketched a glimp' o' him as he passed the Forks," he added. "I knowed the horse in

a minnit, and tuck the man to be you, ontel I see you jest now."

Harry quickly made known what had happened, and they jumped to the conclusion that the thief must be making for Howard, no doubt ignorant that the horse was quite as well known there as its master.

"Some o' the boys'll be sure to notice the hoss, an' they'll either ketch the critter trippin' in his a'count o' how he come by the hoss, or else they'll give him the hint o' danger unknowin'ly, when he'll skin out o' thar soon's the law 'lows him to. Anyway, there's bound to be fun, an' work fer us, so here goes back with ye."

Harry Ballou was nothing loth, for deeply as he was in love, the loss of his favorite horse was sorely felt, and he eagerly jumped at the faint chance of its recovery.

With a brisk spur they rode on, just reaching the forks of the road when they met Bald Bisbee, who was hastening back to Clayton to show himself in his usual haunts, in order to guard against any suspicion falling upon him when the events of that evening should be made generally known.

It may be stated here that Dainty Lance was also the horseman seen by John Steuben; that whatever else he might be, he was no horse-thief, nor was he riding the missing animal belonging to Harry Ballou.

By one of those remarkable coincidences which sometimes occur, Dainty Lance was as perfect a counterfeit of Harry Ballou as was his horse of the one usually ridden by the banker's son. Seen separately, they would have been confounded by intimate acquaintances, and even when side by side the resemblance would have been remarkable, though there were nearly four years difference in the ages of the two persons. Harry looked less than his age, while Lance appeared fully as much the older than he really was.

The near resemblance deceived Bald Bisbee, who had known Harry Ballou for years, and at his signal, "Decoy Duck" admirably played the part of beauty in distress.

The old man followed them until he saw that their bold ruse had fully succeeded, then set out for Clayton, only to meet Harry Ballou on the road, free as air.

Even the gloom could not conceal the great dismay and confusion into which the old rascal was thrown by this encounter with one whom he had felt confident was at that very moment a prisoner in the hands of the bank-robbers, but Harry overlooked the matter in his eager questioning, and John Steuben attributed it to his position as the head of the Vigilantes.

The sight of this important official warned Bald Bisbee that he was not entirely free from suspicion, and enabled him to return sufficient answers to the flood of questions poured upon him.

He had been passed by a horseman some minutes before, whom he mistook for the banker's son.

This was enough to assure the pursuers that the horse-thief had ridden on to Howard, and they set out again at a rapid rate, eager to reach the end.

"Don't know but what we'd 'a' bin smarter ef

we'd 'a' pumped that old cuss closter," grunted Steuben, in a doubting tone. "He acted mighty skeery fer a honest man."

"The old fellow was more drunk than frightened. I hardly think there is any real harm in the poor old sucker."

The reader knows how far both were from the truth. And it may be mentioned here, that as soon as Bald Bisbee could collect his scattered senses sufficiently to fully understand the magnitude of the mistake he and his allies had committed, he made all haste to the woodland camp of the bank-robbers, in hopes of repairing the error.

That night-ride of Harry Ballou's seemed fated to be continually interrupted, for he and his comrade had not ridden more than three miles after leaving Bald Bisbee, when a dark figure stepped briskly into the road before them, where the bright moonlight shone full into his face. By consequence, the face of the horsemen were cast into the shadow, though their shapes and figures were clearly outlined.

"I lotted your gittin' yer' to-night, Lance," cried the stranger, in a glad, cheerful tone, as the horsemen pulled up their animals in order to avoid riding over the person. "'Peared like I knowed ye was comin'—"

"Guess you've made a mistake, stranger," cried the banker's son, sharply. "There's no one here by the name of Lance—"

"But that ain't sayin' we don't know an' cain't tell you all ye want to know about your mate," hastily interposed Steuben, giving Harry a covert punch of warning. "But to make sure *our* Lance is *your* Lance, give us the rest o' his name an' ockepeation."

"'Spect I've made a durned fool o' myself," uttered the stranger, with a sort of sheepish laugh. "Beg yer pardon, gentlemen, but the light was on yer backs, and that gray hoss looks powerful like the one Lance was to ride, or I wouldn't 'a' made such a p'izen mistake."

John Steuben was taken considerably aback by these unexpected words. The stolen horse was a blood-bay, while the gray horse alluded to was his own saddle nag. But he rallied sufficiently to add:

"You didn't answer my question; Lance who?"

"Jest Lance," was the prompt response. "We pore whites cain't a'ford to give our niggers more'n one name."

"Nigger!" ejaculated Steuben, his last hope fleeing.

"Nigger—sixty y'ar old come next grass—white wool—one eye gone—rides a white hoss—"

The chief of Vigilantes uttered an oath of vexation at having wasted so much time on a false scent, and gave his horse the spur so furiously that it dashed away at full speed, nearly over-running the stranger, who escaped only by a nimble side-leap.

Harry Ballou followed rapidly, leaving the stranger staring after them in mingled doubt and anxiety.

That was the last interruption, however, until the little town of Howard was reached.

During the latter portion of this ride, they talked the matter over, and Harry decided to

place the matter entirely in the hands of his friend, naming the reward he was willing to pay for the recovery of his property.

On his part, Steuben was to pass the word around to the members of the Vigilance Committee, and after a thorough search of the town, if the stolen animal was not found, to scour the country around in quest of it.

Harry only paused long enough at the hotel to have his horse stabled and bespeak his customary room, then hastened to the house where his betrothed lived.

Rose Harvey was anxiously awaiting him, for in the absence of a message stating the contrary, she knew that Harry would not fail in coming.

His reception was warm enough to have satisfied the most exacting lover.

Rose was two years younger than Harry, a perfect brunette, somewhat under the medial hight, but with a form as admirably-shaped and proportioned as that of Queen Mab herself. Like Harry, the only child of loving parents, well to do in the matter of this world's goods, her love was fully sanctioned by them, and thus far not a single cloud had marred their courtship.

Harry Ballou was, as before stated, nearly twenty-one years of age, though looking several years younger. He was tall and slender, though his broad shoulders gave promise of a more athletic form as he grew in years. His face was smooth and guiltless of beard as any maiden's. His long yellow hair hung in ringlets almost down to his shoulders; his eyes were blue as heaven itself; his features regular, though quite strongly enough marked to remove from them the charge of effeminacy, and formed a face far handsomer than is often to be found among his sex.

This description, despite the discrepancy in age, applies perfectly to the young adventurer, Dainty Lance.

Harry Ballou did not remain late with his betrothed, being afflicted with a painful sick-headache, which experience told him could only be slept off, and after an affectionate adieu, during which he promised to come over in the morning immediately after breakfast, the lover returned to the hotel—the only one in the village, by the way—where he found John Steuben awaiting his coming.

"The critter we want hain't nowhars in town, nur yit he hain't bin here," the chief of Regulators began, when he and Harry were together in a retired corner of the large office. "Leastways, nobody hain't see'd nothin' o' the hoss, an' I don't reckon the thief hes bin smart enough to trade him off this airly."

"Then he must have passed around, or else turned off before reaching this place," said Harry, a little sourly. "I may as well say good-by, first as last, to Marmion."

"We'll set out at daybreak, ef he don't come along afore."

"And come back as you go—for luck seems against you Regulators, John," retorted Harry.

But little more passed between the two, for Harry's headache kept growing worse, and only pausing to register his name, he passed up-stairs to his room.

Steuben, no whit disconcerted by the well-founded quip of his young friend, left the hotel and passed into the adjoining building, which was occupied on the ground floor as a bar-room and billiard hall.

As he entered, he made a covert signal, and two men immediately arose from the card table and left the saloon. They were members of the band of Regulators, and understood that they were to relieve their chief from his watch upon the hotel and its stable.

Feeling that he had done everything he could, under the circumstances, until the new day should dawn, Steuben challenged a friend present to a game of billiards, and having full confidence in his subordinates, the worthy chief passed a most enjoyable two hours.

At the end of that time, one of the men detailed to watch the hotel, entered and called for a glass of beer, making a secret signal which Steuben was quick to observe.

Suddenly recalling an important engagement, he abandoned the game, and left the saloon, being almost immediately joined by his spy.

"What's up now?" he demanded in a hurried whisper.

"The hoss stands yonder, hitched afore the door. The man as rid it, 'long with another critter, hes gone inside."

Steuben hastened to where the two horses were standing before the hotel, and made a hasty examination. Though the shade trees intercepted the rays of the descending moon, Steuben felt confident that one of the animals was indeed the stolen horse, and sent the man with him to hurriedly collect half a dozen of the Regulators, in order to make the capture of the thief a matter beyond doubt.

During this brief interval, he stood guard over the horses, resolved to take the thief single-handed, in case he should attempt to leave the hotel before reinforcements arrived.

But this attempt was not made, and followed by his men, Steuben ascended the steps and entered the hotel.

CHAPTER IV.

PLAYING WITH EDGED TOOLS.

THE consternation which followed the excited announcement of Bald Bisbee that the wrong man had been captured, was so great that if Dainty Lance had chosen to make the attempt, he could have fled under cover before a hand or weapon could have been raised to check him. But apparently nothing was further from his mind than the idea of flight.

Tall, erect and graceful, he stood there, surrounded by the bank-robbers, an amused smile playing around his short upper lip as he noted the result of the thunderbolt cast into their midst by the agitated old sinner.

Hammer Fair was among the first to recover his wits, and with a swift step forward, his heavy hand closed firmly upon the shoulder of Dainty Lance.

"Who are you, boy? What trick have you been trying to play off on us?" he asked, sternly.

"I am Lance Daintree, as I told you from the very first," coolly replied the youth. "But you wouldn't have it so. You had made up your mind that I was somebody else; so much so that

I found myself obliged to knock down one of your number for insisting that I was a hairy baboon, or some such outlandish animal."

"But at the last—you acknowledged it—"

"Not exactly," interposed Lance, with a light laugh. "I saw that you were all determined to make me out somebody else, and as I didn't care particularly about thrashing you all, one after another, I simply favored your hallucination by asking what would be the consequences if my name was really Harry Ballou. At the same time I warned you that I did not admit being the person you took me for."

"That plea, cunning as you seem to think it, will serve you little, young fellow," said Fair, his heavy brows contracting darkly. "You have heard too much—"

"Then tell me more," interrupted Dainty Lance, with a cool audacity that seemed measureless. "This blunder may turn out to be one of the wisest moves you ever made."

"As I said before, I am out of work, just now, and on the lookout for a job which combines amusement with good pay. You have seen enough to-night to know that I am no infant, but if you still doubt my being man enough for your business, I am willing to stand any and all tests of strength or skill which you may propose."

"He is a spy—he only wants time to betray us!" growled Daniel Rowe, arising from the ground with some little difficulty.

"I haven't learned you to hold your tongue while men are speaking?" cried Dainty Lance sharply. "The third time I am forced to soil my hands with you, will be the last—remember that!"

Daniel Rowe was no coward, and though he had been wholly disarmed by Abe Tinker, according to orders, he rushed headlong upon his tantalizing enemy, from whom he would doubtless have received punishment even greater than before, had not Fair interfered.

Springing between the two, he closed with Rowe, twisting him to the ground as a child might bend over a reed, then turned sharply upon the independent youngster:

"As for you, put a guard over your tongue, or I will have you bound and gagged. Hand your weapons over to Tinker and consider yourself a prisoner until we can decide what disposition to make of you."

Until now, the outward appearance of the youth had been that of one engaged in an amusing masquerade, rather than in an adventure where his life might pay the forfeit of his audacity, but at these words the smile vanished from his lips, his features grew stern-set, while a steely glitter filled his blue eyes.

With a quick, sidelong leap, he reached and planted his back against the tree-trunk where Daniel Rowe had stood, at the same time drawing a revolver with each hand. His voice was sharp and menacing as he said:

"No one man can take them, nor your whole company, until after they have eaten the contents!"

Beyond a doubt the attempt would have been made, and it is equally certain that bloodshed would have followed before the dauntless youth could be either disarmed or killed, but before

Hammer Fair could utter the words that trembled on his tongue, Decoy Duck reached his side and made an appeal that turned the scale.

"Better a live friend than a dead enemy," she said in tones loud enough for all to hear. "He is ready to join the band, and where would you find a better or a braver ally? If you make an enemy of him, you must either kill him or abandon the plan which has already cost us so much time and trouble. Besides," she lowered her voice so that the ears of her father alone could catch her words, "there will be time enough to strike when you know he is playing us false. Swear him in, and I will watch his every movement. It is the surest plan."

Hammer Fair pushed her aside, then confronted Dainty Lance, who still stood on his guard with pistols ready for use, but the chief had recognized the wisdom of Decoy Duck's arguments, and made a gesture indicating peace.

"You heard what my daughter said; are you willing to become one of us, to take the oath of fidelity, to perform faithfully the duties assigned you?" he demanded.

"I said so from the very first," was the cold response. "I am still willing to join you, but not because I am *afraid*; if any of you have that idea—"

"Whatever else you may be, you are no coward," interrupted Fair, speaking frankly and extending his hand like one who did not yield his confidence half-way.

Decoy Duck nodded slightly, and Dainty Lance replaced his weapons, then grasped the proffered member.

Everybody appeared relieved and satisfied by this manner of settling a delicate point, save Daniel Rowe, who yielded his hand reluctantly, growling surlily:

"Long as you prove square, there can't be any quarrel between us, but I give you warning that I mean to keep an eye on you. I don't believe you are what you pretend. I believe you are playing a part, and that you will betray us at the first opportunity. But mind. I'm watching you, and at the first false move, I'm down on ye!"

"You've been down on me twice, already, but I don't feel much the worse for wear. Better luck to you next time," retorted Dainty Lance, laughing easily.

During this scene Bald Bisbee had been fidgeting around as though resting on needles, uttering an occasional growl at such waste of precious time, but not until now could he manage to secure the attention he coveted.

He explained how it chanced that he had made the unlucky mistake of sounding the signal for the capture of Dainty Lance, and not one of his auditors could blame him, since the same fatal resemblance had deceived them all.

"I, for one, am very glad that the old man made the mistake," said Decoy Duck, softly, an upward glance from her dark eyes emphasizing her words most pleasantly to the ears for which they were intended.

Not that Dainty Lance was in love with the dashing beauty of the wild woods, or even fancied he was. He was no sentimental fool, nor had he been raised in a hot-house, like the

perfumed dandies of citydom, who are *blase* at his age and old men at twenty. But he was flattered by the unconcealed interest which Decoy Duck took in him, and thus found one more excuse for the course he had hastily decided on following.

Perhaps of all, Dainty Lance felt the strongest interest in his "double," of whom he had never heard before this night, and as he began to divine the bold plans of the bank-robbers, he generously resolved to do all he could to baffle them and aid his counterfeit.

He was now a sworn member of a band of bank-robbers, one at least of whom would spare no pains to catch him tripping, and another of whom was already making furious love to him.

On the whole, Dainty Lance began to suspect that this time he had fairly "put his foot in it."

Still, he gave no outward signs of discomposure, and with a malicious desire to annoy Daniel Rowe, he met the cordial advances of Decoy Duck more than half-way, and soon found himself making furious love to one for whom he did not care a row of pins.

The girl, too, was assuming far more warmth than she really felt, doubtless having the same laudable end in view, but she was not so busy that she could not follow the thread of Bald Bisbee's story, and at its end she put in an observation that was fated to strongly influence the future of every character then present.

"You say that Harry Ballou has gone on to Howard. What is there to hinder us from following him, and taking him captive there? We know where he puts up. We can smuggle him out of the hotel, or we can wait and watch our chance to-morrow. He and his lady-love will stroll out together, or else take a ride or drive. Either way we can capture him, and finding out what we wish, open the bank on Sunday night."

A hasty discussion followed, during which Dainty Lance strongly favored the plan, believing he saw a chance of putting Harry Ballou upon his guard, without too openly showing his hand.

It was finally decided to act upon the plan proposed by Decoy Duck, who immediately slipped away to prepare for the part assigned her.

A little comforted by the brightened prospect, Bald Bisbee took his departure and hastened back to the town in order that suspicion might not be directed toward him, thus injuring his value as a spy and ally of the bank-robbers.

Decoy Duck soon made her reappearance, dressed in masculine garments which peculiarity suited her style of beauty, dark and radiant. She would have aroused no suspicion of being other than an unusually handsome boy.

Despite his knowledge of what she really was, the daughter and companion of crime-stained felons, Dainty Lance felt his heart beat fast with growing admiration, and his cheek flush warmly as the girl stood before him in silence, waiting for his judgment on her masquerade dress.

At the same time Lance saw Daniel Rowe standing not far off, closely watching them, and this caused him to bend his head and lightly

press the red-ripe lips that shone so temptingly in the firelight.

It was a foolish act, considering all the circumstances, and was to bring its own punishment.

It made the jealous lover all the more his enemy, and though Decoy Duck shrunk away with a feeling of timidity, as new as it was strange to her, it was not an angry glow that filled her dark eyes. From that moment she was no longer her own mistress. A fiery unreasoning passion was kindled in her wayward heart by that careless, defiant kiss, and though she was one of those ardent spirits, who find it easy to die in defense of those they love, her vengeance in case of neglect or treachery would be even more speedy and sure than that of a revengeful man.

Dainty Lance knew nothing of all this. The kiss was given as a defiance to the jealous lover, in return for his threat; and as Rowe turned silently away without the expected outburst of rage, Lance forgot all about the matter in the bustle which accompanied their preparations for the road.

There were nine men in the company besides the chief, Decoy Duck and Dainty Lance.

To avoid exciting suspicion in case they should meet any travelers along the road, the band was divided into four equal portions, with instructions to ride separately, but all meet just before reaching the town.

Father, daughter and the new recruit led the way. This was the choice of Decoy Duck, for Hammer Fair was in favor of having Daniel Rowe with him, but Duck, in an aside, gave him reasons which satisfied him.

Through Bald Bisbee, they had learned that Harry Ballou stopped at the hotel while in Howard, and it was to make sure that he had not ridden on with Steuben, whom they knew to be chief of the Regulators, that this visit was to be paid.

Leaving Hammer Fair on the outskirts of the village to await the gathering of the band, Decoy Duck and Dainty Lance rode merrily on together, neither one of them dreaming of the terrible trials in store.

The hotel was reached, the riders alighted and hitched their horses beneath the shade trees, then entered the building.

The clerk eyed Dainty Lance with evident surprise, and that worth laughed in his sleeve at the mystification, for he knew that he was taken for Harry Ballou.

Decoy Duck played her part well, and was leisurely glancing over the register, when the door opened and the Regulators entered, John Steuben at their head.

In an instant the quick-witted girl divined that mischief of some kind was brewing, from the strange looks with which the half-a-dozen Regulators eyed herself and companion, but before she could give Dainty Lance a warning word or look, Steuben spoke:

"Which one of you owns that bay hoss hitched out yonder—the one with the Mexican saddle?"

Dainty Lance turned around in surprise at this unceremonious salutation, and without no-

ticing the warning glance and gesture of his fair companion, answered, quite as bluntly:

"I do. What concern is it of yours?"

"That's a stolen hoss—you're the thief, an' my pris'ner!" cried Steuben, sternly, springing forward.

But before his heavy hand could alight upon the astonished adventurer, Decoy Duck thrust a revolver almost against his temple, and sent a bullet through his brain!

CHAPTER V.

A TRANSFORMATION SCENE.

THIS desperate deed was accomplished so suddenly and was so wholly unexpected, that the onlookers seemed literally petrified with horror and amazement.

"Shoulder to shoulder—make a rush for the door!" uttered Decoy Duck, in a clear, sharp whisper that penetrated the brain of Dainty Lance like a knife. "Once outside and on our horses, we can laugh at them—but if they pen us in here, we will be butchered!"

Though rapidly spoken there was not the remotest trace of fear or trembling in these words.

Dainty Lance saw that John Steuben was dead ere his body measured its length upon the floor, and experience told him that a bloody retribution would be exacted by the friends of the slaughtered man, unless they could effect their escape by speedy flight.

"Clear the road!" he cried, sternly, folding one arm around the waist of Decoy Duck and leaping toward the door. "The man who tries to bar the way dies like a dog!"

He held a revolver in his right hand, but made no attempt to use it as the astonished men mechanically fell back from before him, leaving a passage clear to the outer door; but not so Decoy Duck.

She seemed possessed with a devil that urged her to slay and spare not, and twice during that brief passage to the door, her pistols spoke with deadly intent, if not effect.

Each time Dainty Lance foiled her aim by a quick jerk, causing the bullets to expend their force upon the insensate walls instead of living flesh and blood, but this served to delay them and waste several precious moments.

The sounds of firing attracted attention without, and eager to learn the cause, the adjoining saloon was emptied, the men rushing up the steps and bursting into the hotel just in time to cut off the retreat of Decoy Duck and Dainty Lance.

"Keep close behind me and all will go well!" cried the youth, his courage rising to meet the emergency.

He knew that capture now would mean almost certain death, yet he could not bring himself to use his revolvers other than as clubs.

With a power and force that were amazing, Dainty Lance assaulted the new-comers before they could realize the actual state of affairs; knocking them over like so many nine-pins before a well-bowled ball, and clearing the doorway as by magic. But then he heard a half-choked cry behind him, and turning his head, he saw Decoy Duck down upon one knee, her

ankle in the grasp of one of the men knocked over by his furious onset.

Two blows in swift succession toppled over his nearest foemen, then Dainty Dance dashed his foot into the face of the man who still clutched Duck by the ankle, hurling him along the floor, bleeding and senseless. Then he raised the form of the girl in his arms, and ran swiftly down the steps, placing her in the saddle with a mighty exertion, cutting the halter close to the bits.

At this moment a pistol was fired from the top of the steps, and with a sharp cry Dainty Lance staggered and fell against the shoulder of the alarmed horse, completing its fright, and sending it down the street at a mad pace, Decoy Duck, half-unconscious, clinging mechanically to its mane.

With angry yells the men rushed forth and pounced upon the fallen youth, each one eager to deal him a blow, and had not their eagerness defeated itself by forming such a confused heap over the prostrate body, there can be little doubt but that would have ended the earthly career of the young adventurer.

Harry Ballou was aroused by the fearful tumult, and rightly attributing in to the cause in which he had enlisted the services of John Steuben and the Regulators, he hastily rushed down stairs, just in time to notice the fall of the supposed horse-thief.

Though naturally quiet and peaceful, when once aroused the banker's son was fearless as a lion, and unwilling to stand by while murder was being done even upon a criminal, he rushed into the *melee* and soon succeeded in bringing the men to their sober senses.

Clearing themselves, they picked up Dainty Lance, who was insensible, quite as much from the effects of the suffocating pressure upon him, as from the pistol-shot, and carried him up into the hotel.

Here Tim Farrer, a stalwart settler of Irish descent, and who had been a second in command of the Regulators, assumed the control of the case, calling to his aid those belonging to the organization and peremptorily clearing the room of all outsiders, with one exception.

Harry Ballou, though no Regulator, was suffered to remain, being the owner of the stolen horse.

This done, attention was directed toward the fallen chief, for the first time, but a brief examination of his person speedily proved him beyond all earthly aid.

When this result was made known, a deep, deadly murmur arose that showed what scant mercy the prisoner need expect at the hands of his captors.

Harry Ballou shuddered and turned pale, brave as he undoubtedly was, and sorely regretted that he had not suffered the loss of his horse, favorite though it was, rather than have the blood of this youth, so strangely like himself, resting upon his conscience.

Feeling as though he would suffocate in that close room, he made an excuse to leave it for a few moments, using the horse still standing outside as a pretext.

Several of the Regulators bore him company, and there was no little excitement occasioned

among them and the motley crowd which had collected before the hotel, by his positive assertion that there had been a terrible mistake made—that the horse was not the one owned by him!

The resemblance was as remarkable as the one existing between the young men themselves, but Harry soon pointed out the absence of several minor marks that distinguished his own horse, and conviction followed.

Filled with a new hope by this important discovery, Harry Ballou returned to the hotel and made it known.

"That proves he is no horse-thief!" he cried, eagerly. "He was wrongfully assailed, and committed no sin in defending his life. You must let the poor fellow go free!"

Tim Farrer pointed significantly toward the corpse of John Steuben, lying in a pool of its own blood.

"Life for life!" he enunciated in a deep, solemn tone. "As good and true a man as ever lived, lies yonder dead, assassinated while in the discharge of his sworn duty. His blood would haunt us night and day, were we to suffer his slayer to escape our vengeance!"

A deep, sullen murmur ran around the room.

"But there was another man," persisted Ballou, reluctant to yield while the ghost of a hope remained. "He may have been the one to fire the fatal shot. Who saw it all?"

There were at least half a dozen present who had been witnesses of the entire scene, but the majority of them had been roughly handled during the rush made by Dainty Lance and Decoy Duck in the effort to escape, and when Farrer called upon them to bear witness, they had but one story to tell between them.

Whether they had been unable to distinctly see which hand had fired the shot that laid John Steuben low in death, or whether they were not unwilling to perjure themselves in order to avenge the hard knocks the present prisoner had dealt them, can only be conjectured, but certain it is that they one and all swore point-blank that Dainty Lance discharged the death-shot.

The hotel clerk knew better, for, from his position he had a side view of the whole affair, but he was a timid sort of creature who always floated with the current, and on being appealed to, said that he could not safely swear to the one who had fired the first shot.

Dainty Lance had recovered his consciousness while this investigation was under way, but he held his peace, knowing that whatever he might say would only enrage the Regulators still more against him.

He watched Harry Ballou with a peculiar interest, not only because he was interesting himself in his welfare, but for the extraordinary likeness which existed between them.

Harry Ballou did not yield easily, though he now saw that he was fighting hopelessly against fate. What little chance there might have been for the prisoner was utterly destroyed by this false witnessing.

Even Tim Farrer at length grew impatient, and told Harry that he would save trouble by quietly leaving the room.

"The boys are growing angry, and you may

get roughly handled," he added, in an undertone. "You can do nothing here. If an angel from Heaven should come down to bear witness in his favor and plead for his life, it would be breath spent in vain. John Steuben was murdered, and his slayer must hang—that's flat!"

Harry realized the truth thus told.

Tim Farrer had not spoken too strongly. Dainty Lance was already doomed to death, and the Regulators were panting with their eagerness to avenge upon him the death of their idolized chief.

More as a form to quiet his own conscience than from any doubt as to the answer he would receive, the newly-promoted chief put the momentous question: guilty or not guilty?

The verdict and sentence came in the same breath:

"Guilty of murder—to be hanged on Gallows Oak!"

No one thought of asking when the dread sentence should be carried out. The Regulators never allowed their resolutions time to cool. Verdict, sentence and execution went all together.

With a wild, fierce growl that plainly told those without what was coming, the Regulators jerked their prisoner to his feet, half a dozen strong hands grasping his person.

The door was flung open, the excited crowd parted and made way for the company to pass through.

Dainty Lance quietly yielded to the impulse given to him, but there was no trace of fear upon his pale, blood-stained features. He knew that any present attempt at escape would be worse than useless. He coolly bided his time, watching for a more favorable opportunity to make a desperate dash for liberty.

The Gallows Oak—the name explains itself—stood not quite half a mile out of town, and the yelling, bloodthirsty crowd were not long in covering the distance.

There were few preliminaries. A huge bonfire was kindled, both to give light to the executioners, and permit the crowd to see the whole affair; then a long rope was tossed over the stout, horizontal limb beneath which the doomed youth stood, and Tim Farrer fitted the noose around his neck.

As the men who had held him darted away, eager to do their part in swinging him into eternity, Dainty Lance, believing that this was his only chance of escaping a shameful death, gradually turned around so as to nearly face Tim Farrer, his muscles steeled to the desperate attempt; but then he hesitated, for his eyes rested upon a face he knew well.

A short, sturdy form, clad in buckskin and woolen, pressed through the crowd, crying:

"That knot'll slip, Mr. Farrer! At the fu'st pull the p'izen critter 'll be loose and away from ye!"

Taken by surprise, the amateur hangman suffered the bold intruder to snatch the noose from his hand, and fling it clear from the throat of Dainty Lance!

"Run fer it! take kiver, Lance!" cried the young fellow, and as he spoke, his right hand rose and fell, driving a long, keen bowie-knife

to the very haft in the broad chest of the Regulator, who flung up his arms and fell backward without a groan, his heart cloven in twain.

CHAPTER VI.

A FRIENDSHIP TRUER THAN STEEL.

THOUGH retrospective glances are generally unpleasant ones, and liked by neither reader nor writer, at the present stage of this story, such becomes absolutely necessary.

Perhaps it would have been better for both John Steuben and Harry Ballou, if they had not so lightly accepted the explanation given by the young fellow who brought them to a halt in the rapid ride to Howard. But they were not the only persons deceived on that night of strange events.

With the moon shining upon his back, as he stood gazing after the two horsemen, the young fellow uttered a low, unconscious sigh of perplexity and apprehension.

Not on his own account. Zephaniah Hardy had fought his way through the world ever since early childhood, and the daily conflict had so toughened him that by a perfectly natural transposition he became Hardy Zeph.

That sigh, then, was on account of his best friend and self-elected master, Lancelot Daintree.

Zeph felt certain when he entered the road and barred the way, that Harry Ballou was Dainty Lance, and this belief was wholly unshaken when the banker's son rode impatiently past him. He thought that his friend had some good reasons for denying his identity, which the hasty questions put by John Steuben seemed to confirm. Hence his adroit and effective evasion.

"He's playin' some o' his darin' tricks," muttered Zeph, watching the receding horsemen. "He didn't want to be knowed. An' from the way that feller with him talked, he ain't no fri'end."

He said no more. This last reflection decided his course, and with broad breast squared, his head thrown slightly back, Hardy Zeph broke into a swift, level run that carried him over the ground at a wonderful rate, and kept him within hearing of the clattering hoofs upon the hard road ahead.

It was a long race, but Hardy Zeph was well named, and maintained his pace with ease.

He was only a few rods behind the horsemen when they rode into the little town, and as they slackened their speed on reaching the outskirts, he could dog them without fear of attracting unwelcome attention by his rapid gait.

The occasional glimpses he could obtain of Harry Ballou's face only confirmed his belief that the banker's son was his friend, Dainty Lance, and with a dogged fidelity peculiarly his own, Hardy Zeph kept the young man in view, though holding himself in the background.

When Harry Ballou left the hotel, Zeph was close behind him, and this distance was maintained until the banker's son was admitted by Rose Harvey.

Zeph was untaught, unskilled in the various subtleties of polite society, and did not know that there was any particular harm in playing the spy or eavesdropping, when he fancied his

ends were to be served by such means, and jealously fearful on his friend's account, he prowled around the Harvey house until, from the fork of a shade tree before the building, he found he could catch a glimpse of the people in the dimly-lighted parlor through the thin lace curtain.

What he saw there puzzled him not a little, but at that distance and through that cobweb-like screen, the eyes of a mother could not have told Harry Ballou from Dainty Lance, and Zeph did not realize the mistake he was laboring under.

As already recorded, Harry Ballou made only a brief stay with his betrothed on that evening, pleading his severe headache as his excuse, and Hardy Zeph followed him back to the hotel.

The friendly spy did not enter the room where Harry and John Steuben were consulting, but stood upon the steps in the deep shadow cast by one of the shade trees in front of the hotel, eagerly watching the banker's son.

The latter was standing with his back toward him, and the conversation was conducted in such a guarded key that not a single word reached the ears of the eavesdropper.

But then, as Harry Ballou turned around, face toward the door, stretching his arms and yawning wearily, the young trapper discovered his mistake.

To those who knew Dainty Lance intimately, there was a distinguishing mark that could not possibly be mistaken.

Upon his throat was a small red scar, the trace of a red-skin's nearly fatal bullet, which wound was received by Dainty Lance on the occasion of his first meeting with Zephaniah Hardy.

That occurred some two years before this story opens, and though only a boy, even then Hardy Zeph had won a name as an adventurous and successful trapper.

Dazed and bewildered by the extraordinary resemblance, the boy trapper descended the steps and mechanically left the village, thinking only of reaching some quiet spot where he could puzzle out the enigma at his leisure.

This spot was soon secured, but Zeph soon found that the more he reflected, the further he seemed from the right solution. Dainty Lance had told him that he had no living relations; that he had never been in that portion of Missouri before.

Then who was the stranger who, save for the absence of that blood-red scar, might well have been the twin brother of his friend?

"He must 'a' come here since I left, or I'd 'a' knowed him," muttered the boy trapper, lost in a maze of wild conjectures.

True friends and sworn comrades though they were, both of the youngsters had kept back something of their past life, while believing that the other was open as day in his confessions.

There was a deep mystery surrounding the earlier life of Dainty Lance, to which he did not possess the key, though he suspected something of the truth. But not even to his bosom friend could he bring himself to breathe these suspicions.

So too did Zeph have his secrets, though they sprang from an entirely different source.

Though ignorant in book lore, unable even to write or read his own name, Zephaniah Hardy was proud and sensitive, despite his rude exterior.

Son of ignorant squatters, whose main delight was found in drinking and fighting between themselves when drunk, Zeph was early forced to "hoe his own row," and took to the rifle and woods when not as long as his own ramrod. For years he kept the family in food, the old man selling his furs and skins for whisky, then amusing himself between his pitched battles with his double-fisted wife, in thrashing little Zeph for not being a still more successful forager.

He used the rod once too often, and Zephaniah Hardy struck out in the world to carve a fortune for himself, nor had he ever returned to the home of his childhood until now.

He knew what to expect, and shrunk from letting Dainty Lance see his degraded parents. He made a clumsy excuse for the separation, which Lance good-naturedly accepted as sufficient, and after agreeing to rendezvous at Howard on the coming Sabbath, Zeph hastened to the house of his birth.

There is no need of following him thither. Enough that matters had grown worse instead of better with the Hardy family, and after his intimate association with one of nature's gentlemen, like Lancelot Daintree, Zeph would rather have died than return to such a miserable life.

He left the larger portion of his savings as a trapper, a sum sufficient to keep the old folks drunk for a year, then, sick at heart, he turned his back upon the old cabin forever, and lay in wait along the road to intercept Dainty Lance, in case he should keep the rendezvous ahead of time.

All this passed before the whirling brain of the boy trapper, as he crouched down in the fence-corner, nor did he arise until the sound of pistol-shots and excited yelling came from the direction of the village.

Human nature is the same in buckskin and in broadcloth, and Zeph obeyed the impulse which draws us all to the scene of any especial disturbance or row, though he had not the ghost of a suspicion that his friend and heart's-master was so terribly interested in that tumult.

But he was not long in making the discovery. The blood-bay horse told him the terrible truth, and had not the doors of the hotel been strongly guarded, could Zeph have attained a single glimpse of Dainty Lance, he would have died in the desperate attempt to rescue him.

Luckily for them both, he was forced to wait, and this gave him time to control his mad passions before the prisoner was led forth to meet a shameful death beneath the Gallows Oak. But though he was outwardly cool enough, Zeph was none the less resolved to either rescue his master, or else die in the generous attempt.

Though never even dreaming of a rescue, the Regulators kept their ranks close around the prisoner, and not until the noose was fairly placed around the throat of Dainty Lance, could Zeph see a chance of interfering.

On the spur of the moment, he called out as heretofore recorded, and cut down Tim Farrer with a desperate blow, bidding Dainty Lance

take advantage of the confusion following his daring attempt, and make his escape under cover of the darkness.

This might have been done with comparative ease, since the crowd was seemingly petrified with amazement, but Dainty Lance saw that his friend was facing the enemy, as though intending to cover his retreat, and refused to accept the sacrifice.

"With you—not alone!" he cried, resolutely.

It was no time for argument, and Zeph thrust a revolver into his hand, armed himself in the same manner.

"Shoot to kill—open a path through 'em!" he grated, setting the example and firing into the thinnest portion of the cordon around them.

A man fell at the report, uttering a horrible screech of bitter agony, and his companions hastily broke and left the way free for the dauntless youth. But those around had been given time to recover from the surprise, and as the boys leaped forward fire was opened.

Dainty Lance stumbled and fell headlong. Believing him killed or disabled, Zeph snatched up the dropped revolver, and standing at bay over his friend, poured a deadly fusilade into the yelling crowd!

CHAPTER VII.

A WOMAN'S FAITH.

WHEN that hand caught her by the ankle and flung her headlong to the floor, Decoy Duck received a shock that nearly stunned her, making what followed seem like some horrible dream rather than reality. And yet she understood all that happened, though unable to help herself beyond mechanically clinging to the mane of her affrighted horse as it galloped wildly down the street, up which she had ridden with such different thoughts only a few minutes earlier in the evening.

Her limbs seemed paralyzed for the time, though her brain was active enough.

She heard the pistol-shot that struck Dainty Lance just as he settled her fairly in the saddle. She heard the sharp exclamation that burst involuntarily from his lips, and from the lifeless manner in which he had fallen forward against her horse, Decoy Duck felt that he was slain outright—that he had yielded up his young life as a gallant sacrifice in her defense.

She felt that she must turn about and retrace her steps, to share his fate—but her limbs fortunately refused to obey the mad impulse of her disordered brain, and the terrified horse darted out of the village and only slackened its pace as it came near and recognized its mates.

The bank-robbers heard the alarm, and instinct told them that Decoy Duck and her companion had fallen into trouble. They started forth from their place of waiting, meaning to charge through the town and recover the daughter of their leader at all hazards, if still living, when they caught the sounds of a shod horse rapidly drawing near, and in hopes that their friends had effected their escape, the bank-robbers drew up alongside the road.

"There's only one horse," uttered Daniel Rowe, in a bitter tone. "You will find it just as I warned you it would be. That cursed boy has given her the slip, and even if Duck has es-

caped, he will blow all our plans and make the country too hot to hold us!"

There was no answer made to this vicious speech, for the last words had hardly passed the lips of the jealous lover before the running horse was upon them.

Both animal and rider were recognized by each one of the bank-robbers, and each man felt his heart turn sick and faint within him for a moment as he saw how the proud form of his loved mistress lay along the withers of her galloping horse, as though mortally wounded.

With a hoarse, gasping cry, Hammer Fair forged alongside the horse and plucked the form of his daughter from the saddle, then wrenched his own animal up and alighted.

Tremblingly his hands roved over the limp, nerveless form, while his eyes sought for the dreaded wound by the clear moonlight, but in vain. He could discover no signs of either flowing blood or wound.

"The hounds will be upon us in a minute," cried Dan Rowe, in his ear. "We must save her from falling into their hands, be she alive or dead."

The father glanced up at the speaker with an impatient gesture, but not as one who understands the words addressed to him.

Daniel Rowe alighted and with one hand upon the shoulder of the bereaved parent, spoke decidedly:

"You are wasting precious time. The accursed lynchers will follow, and at every cost we must prevent Duck's falling into their hands. Do you understand me?"

"I believe she's dead—she don't answer me," was the only response made by the father, whose brain seemed fairly stupefied by this strange return of his daughter.

A fresh outburst came from the direction of the village. It was the gathering mob yelling and shouting forth their disgust at having the doors of the hotel closed in their faces, but Daniel Rowe read the sounds differently. He believed a chase of the fugitive was being organized, and with a fierce curse of impatience at the stupor of his chief he snatched the nerveless form of Decoy Duck away and made the attempt to leap into the saddle.

But before he could succeed Hammer Fair was upon him, growling and snarling like some infuriated wild beast, and he was forced to drop the unconscious maiden in order to prevent the temporarily insane father from throttling him outright. Even then he was forced to strike the chief several fierce blows in the face before he could free his throat from that terrible grasp.

The pain attending these blows served to awaken Hammer Fair to the reality of their situation, and as he caught Decoy Duck once more to his breast he muttered a brief apology for the violence he had been guilty of.

Daniel Rowe laughed, short and harshly.

"If you are satisfied, I am. But now maybe you'll hear to reason. Those devils yonder are getting ready for a chase. Dead or alive we must keep Duck from falling into their hands. Mount your horse and I will hand her up to you."

"It may be her death, though I can see no

traces of blood," hesitated Hammer Fair, though recognizing to the full the good sense of the words spoken by his lieutenant.

"You need not ride far. A few hundred yards, then you can take to the woods until at a point where you can see for yourself how she is injured, and attend to her injuries. The rest of us will wait close beside the road, and if these hell-hounds come this way in search of her, we will ride on and draw them after us. Quick! she may be dying while you are playing the fool by hesitating!"

At any other time Hammer Fair would have resented this peremptory manner of speech, but now he yielded without a word, mounting his horse and silently holding out his arms for the precious burden, which Daniel Rowe gave him, after one passionate yet furtive kiss upon the marble-like brow.

Lawless, sinful and crime-stained though he was, Daniel Rowe possessed one redeeming point in his love for Myrtle Fair. It was pure as it was passionate.

Hammer Fair rode on in silence, with the form of his loved daughter clasped tenderly to his breast, easing the jarring motion as much as lay in his power, and when Rowe pointed out a side trail leading into the timber, he left the road and entered the shadows, while the bank-robbers drew rein with the intention of drawing off the pursuers whom they expected momentarily.

Though strangely subdued, Hammer Fair was now in the full possession of his faculties, and knowing that his men would not fail in carrying out this part of the game, he did not ride far into the woods before drawing rein, choosing a small opening into which the moon cast its clear rays, where he gently dismounted.

He could see now, what his great agitation had hindered his perceiving before, that Decoy Duck was breathing naturally, that her eyes were open, though filled with an uncertain light that told how complete had been her recent bewilderment.

Renewed hope was struggling with the crushing despair that had taken possession of him when he first saw his daughter come back to him like a dying woman, as he sought for the wound which he believed existed, even while asking her where the injury lay.

Decoy Duck could not say that she was not injured. When cast to the floor by that desperate grasp upon her ankle, her head had struck against the swinging door with terrible violence, in a measure paralyzing her in every limb and muscle.

The anxious father, however, was not long in assuring himself that she had escaped without serious injury, and after pressing her to take a swallow of brandy from the flask he habitually carried, asked her what had occurred.

The fiery liquor speedily unhinged the tongue of the fair Amazon, and in a few hurried words she related the attempted arrest in the hotel, the death-shot, the fierce struggle which followed their attempt to escape, her fall, and the generous conduct of Dainty Lance in sacrificing himself in her defense, when he might easily have effected his own escape unharmed.

"We thought he had betrayed you when we

heard the uproar and saw you coming back alone," uttered the bank-robber, with strong compunction in his tones.

Decoy Duck kissed him impulsively, for this cadence, rather than his words, and when he suggested that they should rejoin the remainder of the band, she eagerly assented.

She was received almost in silence, but it was a quietness that spoke louder far than words. She was their queen—about the only thing they either revered or worshiped.

"The sooner we leave this part of the country, the safer it will be for us all," said Dan Rowe, speaking more gruffly than usual in the effort to hide the great joy and gratitude that filled his heart. "If that boy is not killed outright, those devils will soon squeeze the whole truth out of him, and then they will be after us."

This last sentence was an unlucky one for him.

What had only been a passing fancy for a handsome, dashing youth in Decoy Duck, by the generous self-sacrifice made by Dainty Lance for her sake, had changed into the one undying love of a lifetime. Whatever chance the Gypsy lover had had before, was now destroyed.

"You know our rules," she said sharply. "We are sworn never to desert a comrade while there is breath in his body."

"You said yourself that he was dead," sullenly retorted Rowe.

Any man who had witnessed the fall of Dainty Lance would have believed him dead, slain outright, and so at first had Decoy Duck, but now her purely woman's faith came back to her. One whom she loved so passionately could not be dead. And living, he must be rescued, or else she would share his fate.

This was reasoning such as no man would have been guilty of, but it was characteristic, and Dainty Lance was fortunate in having an advocate whose arguments were founded on love. One, too, that did not hesitate to reinforce the truth by falsehood.

"He is not dead!" she cried, passionately. "I saw him a prisoner in their hands as my horse carried me away. If you are cowards and traitors both. I am neither. Go your ways, and I will rescue him alone, or share his fate, though that be the hangman's noose!"

With an active leap, she was in the saddle, and only for the ready hand and strong arm of Rowe, she would have galloped openly into town, to meet her death.

"If he is still living, we will rescue him," he cried, holding back her horse. "But we must use some prudence. You will only insure his death and our destruction, if you act so rashly."

Though love-smitten, Decoy Duck was no fool, and instantly recognized the truth of this observation. She knew, too, that her point was gained, and suddenly quieted down.

The outlaws had no doubt concerning the truth of their fair comrade's assertion. Reason told them that had Dainty Lance been slain, ere this pursuit would have been made after his companion. That this had not been attempted, the fact of the shouts and cries being stationary, all coming from the same point as at first, was an undeniable proof. And the excitement

over a dead body would be neither so intense nor so long continued.

In common with the rest, Hammer Fair believed that Dainty Lance was a living prisoner, and even if the mutual oath as alluded to by Decoy Duck had not bound him, the generous devotion displayed by the youth would have urged him to attempt a rescue.

Bidding the rest to follow slowly, for now the sound of excited voices was moving south, Hammer Fair advanced on foot in order to discover the actual state of affairs.

This he was not long in doing. He saw that Dainty Lance was indeed alive, a prisoner in the hands of the Regulators, who were conducting him out of the village. Even if he could have doubted their terrible purpose, the shouts and cries of the excited rabble at the heels of the Vigilantes, were only too readily understood.

He hastened back to rejoin his band, and in a few words made known his discoveries.

He, as well as all the rest, with the sole exception of Decoy Duck, realized how nearly impossible it would be for them, with their small force, to effect a rescue from such overwhelming numbers, even with the advantage in their favor of a surprise.

"It will ruin our chance at the bank, even if we escape being killed," muttered Daniel Rowe, sullenly.

"There are other days and other banks," retorted Decoy Duck, sharply. "I hold my life above gold. He restored it to me after I had forfeited it, by sacrificing himself. I swear to repay the debt now, or die with him. You may forget the oath you swore, when he was admitted into the band, but I cannot!"

"We do not forget," said Hammer Fair, addressing his daughter with greater sternness than he often used toward her. "We will do all we can for him, but you must agree to keep in the background and not make a movement only to follow my lead, or I will leave you here, in charge of Abe Tinker, until the job is done, one way or another. Your mad impetuosity will ruin us all!"

Decoy Duck saw that her father was in earnest, and that he needed only the slightest excuse to carry out his threat. So she meekly yielded, promising to obey him to the letter. Doubtless she meant all she said, at the time, but she was young, hotblooded, full of life and courage, besides being madly in love. No need to say more.

Walking their horses, the bank-robbers drew near the excited crowd congregated beneath the Gallows Oak, keeping just without the circle of light cast by the bonfire, carefully watching for the proper moment for a rescue.

They were fully as much taken by surprise as the crowd, when Zephaniah Hardy so audaciously freed his friend from the hangman's noose and struck down stout Tim Farrer before that luckless fellow could even suspect the danger that threatened him.

They saw Dainty Lance fall headlong as though stricken by death, and a piercing shriek of angry horror burst from the lips of Decoy Duck, as she urged her horse through the crowd, parting their ranks like so many reeds.

There could be no hesitation now, and the bank-robbers, yelling, shouting, and using their revolvers, crushed through and over the crowd, close behind Decoy Duck.

Dainty Lance, whose foot had caught in a creeper, leaped to his feet just in time to recognize Decoy Duck, and to knock up the pistol which Zeph was aiming at her, taking her for an enemy, when Hammer Fair thundered past his daughter and grasped Lance by the shoulder, swinging him across his thighs. Then, sounding the signal of retreat, the bold riders sped away from the Gallows Oak.

CHAPTER VIII.

BALD BISBEE AGAIN.

THE double surprise was complete, and, as usually is the case with such a motley crowd, the numbers of the horsemen were multiplied tenfold at least, and long before the new day should dawn, bade fair to become an overwhelming army of gigantic warriors, beside whom the sons of Anak were but babes in swaddling-clothes.

Two men besides Tim Farrer had been slain outright, while a dozen or more others bore painful mementoes of that exciting night in pistol-wounds or in bruises received from the horses when the bank-robbers charged.

This, together with their being deprived of the only two men who had authority to lead them, will account for the Regulators not pressing on in pursuit of the enemy. As for the crowd in general, like other mobs, it might follow a stout lead where the danger was not too great, but no more.

Taking everything into consideration, it will not create much surprise when we say that the bank-robbers succeeded in leaving the Gallows Oak far behind them, having not only rescued their new recruit from death, but that without one of their number receiving so much as a scratch.

For perhaps a quarter of a mile the horsemen kept straight ahead through the open woods, then guided by Daniel Rowe, who possessed a more thorough knowledge of the country than any of his comrades, they veered abruptly to the left, pulling their horses down to a walk and listening intently to the sounds from the agitated swarm behind them.

Until now, Dainty Lance had remained quiet in the tremendous grasp of Hammer Fair, though his position was anything but a comfortable one, but now he was forced to cry enough.

"Let me either walk or mount behind some one of the party," he gasped. "I don't want to find fault, but I couldn't safely swear now which end my head's on."

Decoy Duck promptly rode alongside, and nimbly shifting from her saddle to the croup of the horse ridden by her father, she said, with a lightness she was far from feeling:

"You saved my life, Dainty Lance—I lend you my horse; take it, and we will call it even!"

The young adventurer had too recently escaped from the frightful peril into which he had been cast by her rashness, to feel like ban-

dying words or compliments, but he accepted the offer as freely as it was made.

It was clear even to the most obtuse of the party that as yet none of the enemy had started in pursuit of them. But reason told them that the new day would furnish a sufficient supply of courage, and that they must make the most of the remaining hours of darkness, if they would not be followed and hunted down in the end.

Daniel Rowe soon fancied he saw his way clear, and was leading the party by a moderate *detour* around to strike the main road, where their trail could not be as readily traced as upon the unbroken ground they were now crossing, when a fierce but low curse parted his lips.

"Some one is following us on foot," he muttered, still riding on to avoid giving the alarm to the skulker whose phantom-like figure he had just caught a glimpse of as it crossed a bar of moonshine. "He'll make us trouble in the future, if we don't shake him off—or better still—we will draw him out from the cover further, then turn on and run him down! Better one death than a dozen!"

While Rowe was speaking, Dainty Lance had a chance to collect his scattered senses, and his first thought was of his faithful friend Hardy Zeph—where was he?

A glance showed him that the brave fellow was not among the party, and he instinctively divined the truth.

"I believe that is my friend—the one who came to my rescue first," he said, in an eager but guarded tone. "If so, you must kill me before you injure him!"

Daniel Rowe turned his head with an angry growl, but Decoy Duck quickly interposed:

"Call to him, Lance. If a friend he will answer; if not, then he is an enemy spying on us."

"If it is the one I think, he will recognize my signal. If not, the fellow will be no wiser than before," said the young adventurer, putting a finger to his lips and producing a curious sound that cannot well be described.

Almost immediately there came back a repetition of the sound, faithful as an echo, and in obedience to the glad cry which Dainty Lance uttered, Hardy Zeph approached the party.

If a silent, it was an unusually joyous meeting, when the sworn friends and brothers warmly clasped hands after their narrow escape from death. But Rowe, who felt an uncontrollable hatred for Dainty Lance and everything connected with him, rudely cut the greeting short, by exclaiming:

"While we're playing the fools here, the enemy is at work. We must put a long trail behind us, and find a snug hiding-place before daylight, unless we want to be hunted down like wolves!"

"Ef you say so, Lance, I kin lead ye all to a hidin'-place whar a hull tribe o' red-skins couldn't smell ye out, even ef the' hed noses like blood-hounds," said Zeph Hardy, quickly.

"Can you answer for his fidelity?" asked Hammer Fair, turning to Dainty Lance, with sudden interest.

"Far more certainly than I can for my own," was the hearty response. "Zeph is truer than steel, and what he says you can safely swear to.

Besides, he was born and raised in this country, and knows it like a book."

"Better, Lance, better," put in Zeph with a low laugh. "I cain't tell one letter from another, but they ain't a tree nur a hill nur a holler in these parts that I cain't—"

"Let him mount behind some of us, and finish his history as we ride along," interrupted Rowe, impatiently. "The first we know, those hounds will have us surrounded—"

"They won't take the trail afore daylight," said the boy trapper, confidently. "They was mighty bad skeered when you rid through 'em that-a-way. But how is it, Lance?"

"Lead the way to the hiding-place you spoke of. Some one of these gentlemen will give you a lift—"

"I kin make better time through the woods an' long the trail we'll hev to foller, then the best hoss that ever wore hide an' hoofs," lightly laughed the independent fellow. "You only keep at my heels, that's all."

Daniel Rowe did not exactly fancy yielding the office of guide to a stranger, and a boy at that, but even he was impressed by the quiet self-reliance of the lad, and as he knew of no sure covert anywhere near, his idea having been to break the trail and then ride clear out of the State until the fierce storm should blow over, he yielded with a better grace than might have been expected.

Hardy Zeph proved himself fully equal to the task he had assumed, and before day-dawn the bank-robbers were safely stowed away in the best of cover, a large, dry cave, which abound in southwestern Missouri, affording shelter to both horses and riders.

It might be instructive to detail how admirably and perfectly Zeph broke and lost their trail, leaving no trace behind by which even a blood-hound could have followed them after they first took to the water, miles away from the cavern, but space will not permit. Enough that the task was accomplished to the complete satisfaction of even Daniel Rowe, who went so far as to compliment the boy trapper upon his cunning and skill.

There was only one thing lacking to render the party in general wholly at their ease, and that was their lack of provisions. Water ran abundantly only a few feet from the entrance of the cave, but of food they had not even a mouthful.

"'Twon't be much work to ketch enough fish from the creek to keep us from starvin' to-day—blue-cat, bull-heads, an' red-hoss," laughed Zeph, easily. "An' to-night we kin make a raid on somebody's smoke-house. Anyway, we won't starve while we got nigh a dozen hosses to go on."

His predictions were fulfilled to the very letter. The deeper holes along the stream were literally filled with fish of the kinds named, and in a couple of hours a supply sufficient for the entire party was secured. And right here let me make known a fact connected with the *eating* of a "blue-cat" that will be worth the line or two asked for it.

The large majority of fishermen *skin* the blue catfish before cooking, but the wise man would as soon think of skinning a trout. Cook with

the skin on, eat and congratulate your delighted palate that all fishermen are not idiots.

At daylight that morning the Regulators, strongly reinforced from the ranks of citizens and settlers, took the cold trail in quest of the daring company, but soon lost it beyond recovery. There was much riding to and fro, more boastful talking, but, as the days went and nothing was heard of rescued and rescuers, the people gradually cooled down and resumed their regular occupations.

Observing all due precautions, Daniel Rowe ventured forth about the middle of the week, and under cover of darkness, held an interview with Bald Bisbee, the resident spy of the bank-robbers. From him it was learned that their real business in that part of the State had not even been suspected, people deeming them a band of horse-thieves, though no one had put forward a claim for the animal which Dainty Lance had ridden. In addition he advised them to lie in hiding for a while longer, then deal their blow.

Meanwhile, Dainty Lance began to grow restive under his enforced inactivity. Besides, he found himself in an unpleasant position, on more accounts than one.

The wound he had received, and which had caused his fall just when he had placed Decoy Duck in her saddle, was not a severe one, though the scalp on top of his head was considerably lacerated, but it was enough to furnish the fair Amazon with an excuse for playing the tender nurse, and to make much of the king of her proud heart.

Had Dainty Lance been double his actual age, this fact would not have been disagreeable, whatever the state of his own affections. He could have gracefully received the tender attentions, and repaid them in kind, but lads of seventeen rarely take the trouble to disguise their likes and dislikes. And Dainty Lance did not like, much less love, Decoy Duck. He could not forget how promptly and, as he believed, unnecessarily, she shot down John Steuben; and though he felt grateful to her for her daring efforts in his behalf, by which his life was undoubtedly saved, he quickly wearied of the part he had begun in order to provoke the jealousy of Daniel Rowe.

It might have been different had not Decoy Duck too plainly showed him the state of her feelings.

He began to realize, too, how foolish he had been in the resolve he had taken at the start, and was fast learning the lesson that, soon or late, comes to all who blindly suffer themselves to play with edged tools.

He thought of making his escape, but that he soon saw was well-nigh impossible. His senses sharpened by a fierce jealousy, Daniel Rowe plainly suspected his purpose, and either he or Abe Tinker kept close watch over Dainty Lance, night and day. One or the other of them would certainly foil any attempt at escape.

Dainty Lance thought much of his "double"—of Harry Ballou, who so strangely resembled him in form and face.

He knew how ardently the young man had pleaded his cause, and felt grateful to him accordingly.

It was the desire to repay this debt of gratitude, more than aught else, that delayed him from attempting his escape.

He knew that the band had not yet abandoned their intention of robbing the bank, but the suspicions of Daniel Rowe were gradually spreading among the remainder of the party, and the subject was not openly discussed before him. He knew not whether they meant to make another attempt to capture Harry Ballou, or if they were to follow a bolder course. Until he should learn something definite, and thus be enabled to put his "double" on guard, Dainty Lance was resolved to bide his time, and make the best of his situation.

Perhaps it was fortunate that his hot blood was not put to a prolonged ordeal.

Late on Friday evening, Bald Bisbee gave the signal before the cave entrance, and rushed into the retreat, almost as excited as when he first made his appearance in these pages.

CHAPTER IX.

PREPARING FOR ACTION.

It did not require the gift of prophecy to rightly divine what was at the bottom of all this perturbation on the part of Bald Bisbee, and with a curious thrill that would be difficult to justly define, Dainty Lance felt that he was at length about to gain the object of his weary waiting. But he knew that it would not do to show too great an interest in the matter, and so, guided by fate, he lay still in his retreat until he should be summoned to the general council which he was positive would be called, to take action upon the word brought by Bald Bisbee.

It chanced that Dainty Lance, weary with the confinement, and tiring of the two pointed love-making of Decoy Duck, had stolen away and nestled down in a snug hiding-place—a little niche and shelf in the rock wall of the cavern, above the level of a human's head, and where no ray of light came from the fires kindled for warmth and cooking.

From this refuge, he could see without being seen, and he was speedily to reap the benefit of it.

Hammer Fair chanced to be the one who received the spy in the first place, and Dainty Lance knew that he had not guessed amiss when a beam of the red firelight fell athwart the rugged features of the bank-robber, even though he failed to catch the words that were then uttered.

"The old scoundrel has brought some news of special importance—concerning the bank, of course. Well, almost anything would be better than this sort of life."

The rapid tramp of single footsteps coming from around the curve, checked the reflections of our hero, and he saw Daniel Rowe advancing to meet Bald Bisbee and the chief.

Until that moment Dainty Lance had not even thought of playing the part of an eavesdropper, because he naturally supposed that if there was anything of importance in the wind, he, together with the remainder of the band, would be called to join in the discussion or deliberations.

But the first words uttered by Rowe enlightened him:

"You and I, captain, are enough to receive his report. Right or wrong, you know my opinion of the new recruits. They may be true blue, but there's no need of trusting them any further than we are obliged.

"He favors Harry Ballou too much in looks, not to be some relation of the family," uttered Bald Bisbee. "I don't like him. I'd rather cut his throat than trust him even as far as you have. You'll regret it, sure!"

Hammer Fair yielded, willingly enough. The suspicions entertained and so freely ventilated by Daniel Rowe, had gained a certain influence over his mind. While he laughed at the idea conveyed by Bald Bisbee, he knew it would do no harm to keep Dainty Lance in the dark concerning their plans until it would be too late for him to accomplish his treachery, in case he meditated any.

He expressed as much, and Dainty Lance caught enough of his meaning to determine him to overhear what more passed between the trio of conspirators, even though he should peril his very life in the venture.

But here fortune favored him again.

The cavern itself was very much like a mammoth letter V. The entrance at the base; the two arms being quite large chambers in the rock, separated by a wedge-shaped partition, reaching from floor to roof, the narrow ends being directly opposite the entrance, though distant some three-score feet or more. One of these chambers was allotted to Decoy Duck and her father, while the other was occupied by the other members of the band. Fires were kept burning in each division, for, though quite dry, the air of the cavern was too cool for comfort without some such amelioration.

Thus whoever stood near the edge of the wedge, could command both chambers and the entrance, nor could they be approached by any one, unseen, even while they themselves were in dense obscurity.

For these reasons, the three men drew nearer the point, all unconscious of the fact that the very person of whose good faith they had so freely expressed their suspicions, was crouching in a little recess only a few feet above their heads when they halted for consultation.

Dainty Lance fully appreciated this stroke of good fortune, and eagerly listened to all that followed.

Bald Bisbee lost little time in detailing the purpose of his visit, but he was long-winded, and desired to make the most of his services, so there is no need to repeat his exact words.

From his account, it appeared that the bank of Pierce Ballou was the depository of all the County funds; that as a large amount of interest on the County bonds was nearly due, the Treasurer had that day paid into bank nearly fifty thousand dollars to meet payment.

The interest was not due until the middle of the ensuing week, but the margin was none too great, in the spy's estimation.

"You must capture Harry Ballou to-morrow, or not at all," he added, earnestly. "There must be no failure, this time."

"That was the idea of a romantic girl," said

Rowe, in a sharp, unpleasant tone. "I never favored it. Where is the use of our going all around Robin Hood's barn? I say now, as I said then, that the boldest course is the shortest and the best. One brisk dash, and the money is ours."

This gave a hint of something fresh, and Dainty Lance listened eagerly, almost stilling his breath.

"Suppose we do capture the youngster; how much better will we be off than now? By torture, we might possibly learn from him how the money is stowed away, but he would not be likely to have any of the keys about him. We would either have to burglarize the bank, blow or cut open the doors of the vault and safe, running the risk of being overheard and surprised, or else fall back on the plan I have always advocated."

"You mean to make the attempt in daylight?"

"Yes; it is the safest and the surest way, if you only look at the matter coolly. Remember the time when we rescued Lance, thanks to Duck. We were outnumbered nearly ten to one, yet we came off without a scratch. And the larger portion of that crowd were armed, while the opposite will be the case here."

"We will be a round dozen, not counting Duck, who, of course, will not take any active part in the work. Three of us can enter the bank, as if on business, timing our movements so as to get there at noon, when there will be no customers inside to bother us—no one but old Ballou and his son."

"The others, at a signal, can keep the streets open, by using their horses and pistols, long enough for us to do up our portion of the work. Then, in a body, we can easily clear the town and ride away."

"The shouting and firing would bring everybody out to see what was up," demurred Bald Bisbee.

"Let them come," retorted Rowe. "I tell you that with no more than the men now in our band, I can take any band not over twice the size of Clayton. All it needs is the dash and daring—the *surprise* will do the rest."

"It would be different if they had warning of our coming, or were given time to collect their thoughts and find a man capable of acting as their leader. But there is no danger of that in this case. We will keep our own council until the hour comes for setting out. Then, even if any one wished to play the traitor—and I would hate to risk my life on the truth of that Dainty Lance, while the other boy would scalp his own mother at the nod of his master—if, I say, any one thought of playing us false, they would not have the time or chance for so doing."

"If you doubt those fellows, why keep them with you?"

"As a guard against their playing double," laughed Rowe. "With them under my eye, I know what they are doing, but if we turned them loose—"

Bald Bisbee made a significant gesture, that caused Dainty Lance to note his name in his black book.

"So I will, at the first proof positive that he is playing us false," coldly said Rowe. "But,

until then, he is safe from our hands, by virtue of the oath we have taken."

There was nothing more said on this point, and, after some further discussion, it was decided to act as Daniel Rowe advised; make a bold attack upon the bank at noon, on the next ensuing Monday, trusting to the very audacity of the exploit to carry them safely through with it.

Bald Bisbee finally took his departure, and waiting his chance, Dainty Lance descended from his hiding-place and rejoined Decoy Duck without any suspicion being awakened.

He congratulated himself on having an abundance of time in which to work, and was not long in arranging his plans. Though he had joined the band, and taken the oath of fidelity, Dainty Lance did not feel any particular remorse at the idea of proving false to that vow. All was fair in war, and the sin would be against criminals in favor of honest men.

He watched his chance and wrote a full account of the plot, giving facts and figures, but only the names and number of the regular band. Of course it was not his intention to take any part in the proposed robbery. Both himself and Zeph must manage to effect their escape before the critical moment, even if that could not be done until after the band had entered the town.

Dainty Lance knew that the jealous and suspicious lover would watch him too closely for him to deliver the sealed warning, but he took counsel with Zeph, telling him everything, and that worthy volunteered to take charge of the warning message.

It will be remembered that when the cavern was reached, neither Dainty Lance nor Hardy Zeph had their horses. The latter had left his in safe keeping, and the blood bay was held for a rightful claimant, in Howard, as Bald Bisbee had ascertained.

Rowe was determined not to leave the two new recruits behind when the robbery was attempted, and so it was necessary to procure horses for them. Zeph saw his chance, and said that he could easily recover his own charger, and was willing to attempt to spirit away the bay horse.

His offer was accepted, and that same night the venture was made, Rowe and Tinker bearing him company.

Dainty Lance to cover all contingencies, pinned a bank note to the letter, with a few words on an accompanying scrap, begging the finder to hasten and deliver the letter to its rightful address, keeping the money for his trouble.

"If you can't drop it in the post-office without too much risk, put it where somebody will be certain to find it," he whispered hurriedly in Zeph's ear.

It is not necessary to follow the party on their adventure. Let it suffice that Zeph was as good as his word, not only securing his own horse, but stealing that belonging to Dainty Lance with a skill and silence that raised him not a little in the estimation of his companions. And he dropped the letter at the door of the stable from whence he had taken the animal.

"Would it be found and forwarded in time?" anxiously thought Lance.

CHAPTER X.

MATTERS BECOME COMPLICATED.

Now that he saw a probable speedy end to the part he was reluctantly playing, Dainty Lance became once more the lively, agreeable companion he had been for the first day or two spent among the bank-robbers, and, though he kept Decoy Duck at arm's length by great tact, he did so in such an adroit manner that the love-blind girl was happily unconscious of the truth.

Had he not overheard their plans, Dainty Lance would never have suspected how near they were to the desperate exploit, for neither Hammer Fair nor Daniel Rowe dropped the least hint of the truth where other ears could catch the sounds. Only, once or twice, when some one of the men would utter a growl at their idleness, Dainty Lance caught a meaning glance passing between the twain, which his successful eavesdropping enabled him to interpret correctly.

It was not until after sunset on the Sabbath that the subject was openly alluded to.

In short, blunt words, Hammer Fair told his men that the time was close at hand when they would be able to win a fortune by striking hard and sure.

"Besides the regular deposits, which Bald Bisbee assures me are very large for a country bank, there is now in its safe, fifty thousand dollars belonging to the county. Take it all together, there must be full ten thousand dollars apiece for us. Isn't that worth running a little risk for, boys?"

Dainty Lance cheered quite as lustily as any of the rest, but he doubted if the answer would have been quite as enthusiastic, could the bank-robbers have known about the letter directed to Harry Ballou.

Hammer Fair knew his men well, and so did not dwell long on that point; danger was their food and drink, and not likely to frighten them away from such a glittering bait.

He went on to detail the plan already agreed upon between himself, Rowe and Bald Bisbee.

"We will leave here about nine o'clock tomorrow morning, and as soon as we are outside, separate into pairs, making our way to the town from different sides, timing our progress so as to surround the bank directly after twelve o'clock.

"Two of you will bear me company; our part of the work will be the most important, though no more dangerous than the rest. But to avoid any suspicion of partiality, we will determine the part each man is to play, by drawing lots.

Dainty Lance, though he was careful not to allow it expression in his features, was a little uneasy at this unexpected decision. If he and Zeph should be separated by the drawing, it would render their task of escaping just double what it otherwise would be. Nor would his uneasiness have been lessened could he have known the entire truth.

To all appearance the drawing was conducted fairly and above-board, short slips of paper being plainly numbered and placed in a hat, from which each man drew one as his name was called. But there was craft and cunning underlying it all, Dainty Lance was to be sepa-

rated from Hardy Zeph, and Daniel Rowe was to be his riding mate. So it was decided upon, and so, by adroit manipulation, the "lottery of chance" confirmed.

Through it all Decoy Duck had been an attentive if quiet looker-on, but now, as Hammer Fair resumed his hat with an air of relief, she created a sensation.

"You appear to have entirely overlooked me," she said, in a gentle tone, but with a determined expression around her lips that warned those best acquainted with her of coming trouble.

"All that was decided long ago," said Fair, hastily. "You are to meet us at the rendezvous agreed upon before we came here. That was the only condition on which I would let you bear us company this far."

"Exactly—and knowing that, I told a lie," retorted the fair Decoy, with refreshing candor. "I never intended to obey—I meant to bear a part in the play, and I am more determined than ever, now."

Daniel Rowe uttered a bitter curse, but said no more. He knew that if he interfered, Duck would only be all the more determined, through malicious spite.

Hammer Fair attempted to reason with his daughter, but it was labor spent in vain. Her mind was fully made up, and nothing he might say could alter it.

This was a fresh complication which Dainty Lance had not foreseen, but now gave him serious regret.

At the consultation which he listened to in secret, it had been positively stated that Decoy Duck was not to form one of the party when the attack was made upon the bank, and hence he had not given the matter a second thought.

He knew that if his warning had reached the hands for which it was intended, measures would be taken by the banker to either kill or capture every person engaged in the bold attempt to rob the bank. He had warned them to secure Bald Bisbee in a manner that would fail to arouse suspicion of the actual cause, and to have him guarded so carefully that he could neither escape nor send any message to the outlaw band. As for himself and Zeph, he had felt confident that they could steal away from the others, just before the trap was entered and the critical moment arrived. But now that Decoy Duck was determined to share in the enterprise, he was greatly taken aback and almost regretted the part he had played.

He saw Daniel Rowe watching him closely, and that sight warned him to be prudent.

As every one knew would be the result, when Decoy Duck once decided upon a certain course, Hammer Fair was forced to give way at length, though reluctantly.

Duck bore her triumph modestly and soon after left the men alone to discuss the minor details.

These were soon arranged, and in high spirits at the prospect of exciting work and glorious pay, the bank-robbers separated to see to their horses, horse furniture and weapons.

Dainty Lance watched his chance and ere long succeeded in gaining an interview with

Decoy Duck, never a hard matter to do, since her love was his ally.

Though he dare not reveal his actual reasons for being so urgent, Dainty Lance pleaded hard with the young Amazon to renounce her decision and leave such dangerous work to the men, as should be. But even his arguments failed.

"You are going, and I will not shrink from any danger in which you bear a share," she said, simply.

Dainty Lance was touched by her tender tone despite himself, and was on the point of telling her all that he had done, let the risk to himself be what it might, when he caught a brief glimpse of Daniel Rowe starting cautiously toward them, plainly bent on overhearing their conversation.

Reckless as he was of his own life, Dainty Lance felt that he had no right to sacrifice that of Hardy Zeph, and though he continued his argument, he was careful not to utter a word that could arouse the suspicions of the jealous lover, or rather to turn them toward the cunning trap that had been set for him and his. Then Hammer Fair rejoined his daughter and the chance was gone.

Nor did another one present itself. Daniel Rowe played his part to perfection, sticking to Dainty Lance like his own shadow, and hindering him from speaking a word in private even to Zeph.

More than once that night did Dainty Lance curse his folly in having yielded to the temptation of playing with edged tools, and of having allowed himself to become mixed up in such a disreputable affair.

Though he knew he could clear himself of the charge of horse-stealing, by bringing forward the man from whom he purchased the animal, there were still graver charges which could and would be brought against him, if ever he should be taken prisoner.

He had been with Decoy Duck when John Steuben was killed; Tim Farrer and others had been slain when he was rescued from the noose beneath the Gallows Oak.

Even if he should tell the truth, who would believe it?

All this was brought upon him by Decoy Duck; yet he could not bring himself to abandon her to the fate which lay before the rest. She was a woman—and she loved him!

The eventful day dawned and still Dainty Lance saw no way through the fresh complications that still continued to arise around him.

Decoy Duck openly declared her intention of riding in company with Daniel Rowe but that sullen worthy knew what was really meant. It was not his company that was the attraction, and he scored one more mark against his hated rival!

Dainty Lance dared not remonstrate, since all the others had accepted the situation, and it was with no very enjoyable sensations that he mounted and rode out of the cavern, without an opportunity being given him to do more than exchange a meaning glance with Hardy Zeph.

During their long ride Dainty Lance more than once felt strongly tempted to shoot Daniel

Rowe dead, and thus save both himself and Decoy Duck from the greater danger in store, but each time his manhood revolted. He could not commit a murder.

And at length he saw that any such desperate expedient would be out of the question, for, thanks to his utter ignorance of the country around, they were at Clayton before he realized their near approach.

Strange as it may seem, now that the die was cast and the fates clearly against him, Dainty Lance felt positively relieved, and coolly accepted the situation.

He saw at a glance that there was no unusual stir in the town, that their appearance attracted no attention, and knew that, if his message had not miscarried, Pierce Ballou had taken precautions not to awaken the suspicions of the bank-robbers and frighten them away before they were fairly inside the snare.

As the trio leisurely approached the bank, they saw that the other parties had timed their advance admirably.

Coming from different directions, apparently wholly unconnected with each other, twelve men and one woman were closing in on the bank.

Hammer Fair and the two men who were to bear him company in his work, were a little in advance, and drawing rein before the quiet building whose precious store they had sworn to rifle, they dismounted and hitched their animals to the posts set in the sidewalk.

Casting an apparently idle glance around him, the chief saw that his allies held each one of the four streets, slowly nearing each other, and keenly watching for the signal to begin their share of the work.

Satisfied that all was well, he ascended the steps leading into the bank, then turned and made the fatal signal.

CHAPTER XI.

SPRINGING THE TRAP.

A SIMPLE wave of the hand, but it was the signal for which the bank-robbers were eagerly waiting, and from that moment Pandemonium seemed to have vomited forth its inmates with orders to rendezvous on the Bank Corner.

Yelling at the top of their voices, the bank-robbers urged their fresh and willing horses to top speed, riding to and fro, discharging their revolvers, now into the air, now through the door or windows of the adjacent stores, wherever a curious clerk or employee ventured to show his head, charging furiously down upon whoever made an appearance in either of the cross-streets near the bank, shouting amid fearful oaths, still more terrifying threats of what would follow the slightest hesitation in obeying the orders thus given.

Dainty Lance hardly knew whether to regret or rejoice. It seemed as though his warning must have failed to reach its destination, since the only persons visible rapidly gave way when charged, plainly frightened almost out of their senses. To all appearance the bank-robbers were going to have matters all their own way.

But then, as the yelling, firing horsemen drew closer around the bank, there came a sudden change,

Upon every hand windows were thrown up in the second-story of the stores, and full two score armed men opened fire upon the enemy below.

Hammer Fair had chosen his men well for the sort of work they were intended for, as was now clearly proven.

Two of their number fell dead at the first volley from above, before any one of the band realized the peril that so unexpectedly revealed itself, but then, with still fiercer yells than before, the survivors returned the fusillade, sending whistling lead toward whatever head and shoulders first caught their eye, riding swiftly to and fro, while the leaden hail hissed around them and pattered viciously upon the cobblestones or sidewalk.

Though he had been suspecting the springing of some sort of trap, Dainty Lance was quite as greatly surprised as any of the bank-robbers; and well for him that this was the case.

Daniel Rowe was keeping close beside him in their wild gallopings, and as that volley came, his jealous suspicions caused him to turn upon the new recruit with a deadly fury, feeling sure that since treachery had clearly been at work, here he would find the fountain head. But even he could not mistake the genuine astonishment so plainly written in every feature, and he turned his half-raised revolver toward a bearded man above who was taking a deliberate aim at him with a repeating rifle.

The bullets crossed in mid air, but Daniel Rowe only uttered a reckless laugh as he felt a searing touch across his broad chest, for he saw the bearded marksman drop his rifle, fling up his arms, then fall heavily forward, his body balanced across the window sill, while his life blood trickled out from a hole between his eyes and pattered upon the sidewalk below.

The abrupt appearance of so many armed men, all stationed in positions where they were safe from a charge, told the bank-robbers that their plans had somehow gotten wind, but they were like bulldogs, hard to choke off, and they still dashed recklessly to and fro, resolved to hold their ground until their chief and comrades should make their reappearance.

Dainty Lance failed to do them justice, when he hoped to complete the work so well begun, by shouting loudly:

"We are betrayed! Bald Bisbee has sold us to the Regulators!"

"Shut up!" thundered Daniel Rowe, wheeling alongside, his eyes glowing like living coals, his long black hair floating in the breeze caused by his own swift passage. "Another cry like that, and I'll blow your brains out! We must hold the streets until the captain comes out!"

Dainty Lance hardly heard this threat. His whole attention was now occupied by Decoy Duck who, after the first moment of surprise was passed, seemed fairly intoxicated by the wild excitement, and with a revolver in each hand she was speeding up and down the street, guiding her well-trained horse solely by the pressure of her knees and the swaying of her supple body, sending bullet after bullet into the open windows above, at each shot uttering a clear, musical shout of defiance.

A glorious picture of the wilder sort she pre-

sented then; the beau ideal of a dainty daredevil, for, beautiful as she was, no one not in the secret of her sex would for a moment have suspected her for other than her dress indicated—a boy, half-crazed, in his first fight.

Dainty Lance gave no further thought to his own safety, but sped alongside the young Amazon, vainly pleading with her to make her escape before they were irretrievably hemmed in by the enemy.

"Not until my father comes!" she cried. "Whatever his fate I mean to share it," and Dainty Lance saw from her stern-set features that this was no idle vow.

Thanks to the precautions taken by the suspicious Rowe, Hardy Zeph was one of those most widely separated from Dainty Lance, but when the ambushade was unmasked, Zeph disregarded all else and rode with a bloody spur to regain his heart-brother.

Just as he came opposite the bank, a shot from one of the windows above, intended for himself, struck his horse and killed it instantly.

Catlike, Zeph alighted upon his feet, and with a swift glance around him, sought refuge behind a large dry-goods box lying against one of the stores.

Scarcely had he done so, when Dainty Lance and Decoy Duck came rushing down the street, and Zeph saw a man opposite following their motions with a carbine, evidently determined not to waste his lead by firing before he made sure of his aim.

That carefulness proved fatal to his hopes, for Zeph, recking little what he did so long as it was in defense of his beloved friend, leveled his revolver and sent a bullet through and through the cautious marksman.

At this moment rendered desperate, not for his own sake, but lest the young girl should be killed, Dainty Lance cried aloud as he rode beside her:

"You must go with me—you shall not throw your life away! All is lost! Your father is slain or captured—we are surrounded—I know it, for I sent them the warning!"

Decoy Duck was too terribly excited to fully understand this rash confession, even if she heard the words, which is doubtful when what was to follow is considered, but there was one who did overhear the speech.

Daniel Rowe was riding only a few paces behind the young couple, also shielding the girl as much as lay in his power, by plying his pistols rapidly at each head that showed itself at the open windows, and the words that Dainty Lance uttered penetrated his ears like a dagger-thrust, fully confirming his suspicions.

With a fierce, hoarse cry of terrible rage, he plunged his spurs deep into his horse's sides, and met the couple as they wheeled and came dashing back once more. He no longer thought of the enemy above. He only saw the one who had ruined their well-laid plans and led them to their death. At that moment he felt that he could willingly die, if he might only send this traitor along the death-trail before him.

But terrible as was his hatred, Daniel Rowe was not so carried away as to neglect a chance of making his blow for vengeance certain, and

he wheeled his horse as the couple met him, riding a few feet to the rear of Dainty Lance.

The latter was wholly absorbed in his desire to save Decoy Duck from death or capture, and did not notice Daniel Rowe even by a glance as he joined them. If he had done so, he must have read the truth there in those rage-distorted features, and that would have put him on guard.

As it was, Rowe rode close behind him, and thrust a cocked revolver almost against his head.

But if Dainty Lance saw nothing of this, Hardy Zeph did, and divining the murderous intention of the bank-robber, just as the three riders drew opposite his covert, the boy trapper, with a swift, unerring aim, sent a pistol-bullet straight to the heart of Daniel Rowe, dashing the cup of vengeance from his very lips!

All this time—but a few minutes in reality, though so full of action—nothing had been seen or heard of Hammer Fair and his companions since entering the bank after giving the signal to open the play.

The quick glance which he cast inside the small room before making that signal, had shown him no cause for uneasiness. Pierce Ballou and his son alone were visible behind the glass-topped counter, not even glancing at the men who stood in the doorway.

The signal given, Hammer Fair sprung to the counter, revolver in hand, covering the banker and Harry, crying:

"Up with your hands! Utter a sound or attempt to touch a weapon, and you are dead men!"

His two companions fully understood the part they were to play, and hastily crawling through the window which indicated the paying-teller's position, they grasped the two men, holding pistols against their temples while Hammer Fair crossed the counter.

By this time the uproar was continuous without, for just then the ambushed men opened fire upon the robbers, but the chief had no suspicion of the real facts, and attributed it all to his men.

"You hear that firing?" he cried, with a short laugh. "My men are keeping the streets clear while we clean you out here. There is no fear of our being interrupted, but the less trouble you give us the easier you will escape."

"You don't mean to rob me?" gasped Pierce Ballou, the very picture of utter terror and despair.

"No nonsense! Show us where the money is—your own funds and deposits, as well as the county money. Be quick, or by the horns of the devil! I'll scatter your brains all over the room! Quick—the money!"

"Don't shoot—spare our lives—you shall have all there is here!" gasped and gurgled the banker, trembling in every limb as though under the influence of an ague-fit. "The money is there in the vault—I'll show you."

So admirably did both he and Harry act, that the robbers never once suspected them of playing a part, and as Hammer Fair darted toward the nearly closed door of the vault, they followed, still grasping their prisoners. But their eyes were eager to behold the rich reward of their

daring exploit, and so they failed to intercept the meaning glance which passed between father and son, or noticed how suddenly the muscles stiffened beneath their grasp as Hammer Fair reached the door of the vault.

The chief flung the heavy door open, only to be knocked senseless by a heavy blow as half a dozen armed men leaped out from their contracted ambush!

And at the same moment the two prisoners grappled with the astounded robbers, easily overthrowing them in the instant of surprise, and before either of the ruffians could attempt any resistance, other stout enemies were upon them, and almost ere they could realize the truth, they were both firmly handcuffed.

CHAPTER XII.

A TRAITOR IN THE CAMP.

DANIEL ROWE discharged the pistol he held, but its contents never touched the life he had sworn to take. Death-stricken himself, the sharp pang, as the bullet sped by Zeph Hardy pierced his heart, caused his arms to raise and his head to be jerked backward with a convulsive motion. Thus, though the lead whistled close past his ear, Dainty Lance was unhurt, as he quickly turned his head just in time to read the startling truth in the hatred-glowing eyes that even death could not instantly quench.

Decoy Duck made the same discovery almost simultaneously, and a sickening shudder agitated her frame—a concession of weakness that her own personal danger was unable to extort.

Just at this moment the door of the bank was flung open, and the stout men who had so easily overpowered Hammer Fair and his two assistants, emerged, flushed with victory and eager to complete the good work so well begun.

Dainty Lance saw his chance, and made the most of it.

"You see—all is lost!" he cried, pointing toward the men who had lost no time in opening fire upon the nearest robbers down the cross-street. "Your father has been entrapped, and either killed or taken prisoner. We can do him no good by sacrificing ourselves—"

"Go—flee while you can—leave me here to share his fate!" cried Decoy Duck, wildly.

"We sink or swim together, you and I," quietly responded Lance, plainly meaning what he said. "They must kill me first, before they make you their prisoner."

As soon as he fired the shot that overthrew Daniel Rowe, Zeph Hardy left his covert and hastened to secure the well-trained horse as a means of beating a rapid retreat.

Despite its excitement and high spirits, the noble animal no sooner felt its rider reel and fall, than it halted, standing like a statue of stone, awaiting the remounting of its owner. Thus Zeph was easily enabled to secure the creature, tearing the dead man's foot from the stirrup where it had become entangled, and springing into the saddle, he dashed up to his bosom friend just in time to catch the spirited words recorded above.

"See 't she don't throw herself off," he cried, hurriedly, at the same time bending forward and grasping the reins of Decoy Duck's bridle,

near the bit. "We got to skin out o' yere monstrous quick or else go under."

But the last words of Dainty Lance had answered the purpose for which they were intended. However desperate she might be, where only her own life or liberty was concerned, the love with which the dashing young adventurer had inspired Decoy Duck, was too intense for her to sacrifice his life, and she yielded to his will.

Of all the outlaw band that rode so confidently into town but a few brief minutes before, there were now only two left in the saddle in addition to the trio whose movements we have been particularly interested in, and these two, realizing that all was lost, as soon as the armed force rushed out of the bank, put fresh spurs to the sides of their animals and galloped to join Decoy Duck and her companions in their flight.

For a few moments they were forced to run the gantlet of many a whistling bullet, but though more than once blood was drawn, and Decoy Duck silently flinched as a ball plowed its way through her right shoulder, not one of the saddles was emptied.

But every precaution had been taken by Pierce Ballou to make a clean sweep of the bank robbers, and to cut off any stragglers that might chance to break away from the main snare, each one of the streets leading out of town was guarded by armed and mounted men as soon as the firing announced the springing of the trap.

Just as they began to feel that there was at least a chance for their escaping, the fugitives saw this unexpected obstacle; nearly a half-score men barring their way to freedom.

"Charge home!" cried Dainty Lance, his voice ringing out as clear and defiant as the blast of a trumpet. "It's either them or us! Better die fighting than be captured to end on the gallows! Charge, and make every shot tell!"

There was no trace of fear or faltering in any one of the little band. All knew that Dainty Lance had spoken but the truth. To yield meant death.

Thus, like a human whirlwind they charged along the narrow street, opening fire upon the enemy who, not anticipating such a desperate assault, were thrown into confusion as the winged lead hissed around them. True, they returned the fire, but without any apparent effect, while two of their own saddles were emptied, but when the shock came they were scattered like a flock of sheep when a hungry wolf pounces into their midst.

A wild, defiant laugh burst from Dainty Lance's lips as he rode on, the path now free and unobstructed, but this excited burst was abruptly checked as one of the two robbers reeled in his saddle like a drunken man, then pitched sideways to the ground, a dead man.

And then, for the first time he noticed that Decoy Duck was wounded, from the red blood that was deeply dyeing her garments.

"It is only a scratch, skin deep," she said, with a short, hard laugh, shaking his trembling hand from her shoulder. "I hardly felt it until you spoke. Ride on—we will be chased by an army—a minute lost may be fatal!"

She spoke so clearly and steadily that Dainty

Lance was thoroughly deceived, though he could not help seeing that the flow of blood was suspiciously profuse for a mere scratch. Had his love been like hers it would not have been so easy to quiet his fears.

By virtue of his more thorough knowledge of the surrounding country, Hardy Zeph was tacitly elected leader, and knowing that hot and persistent pursuit would be made, he led the way at a rapid pace, hoping to secure such a start by the time that night fell, as to enable him to throw the enemy wholly off the scent.

Dainty Lance, thinking more of the wound Decoy Duck had received, when he saw that the course Hardy Zeph was following would take them far north of the cavern from whence they had started, reminded the boy trapper of this fact.

"I know it," was the cool response. "That'll be the fu'st place they'll look fer us, when we throw 'em off the track. You know they've tuck Bald Bisbee pris'ner. All they need do is to pinch him a little, an' he'll squeal out all he knows, to make 'em lighter on him."

There was no answer made to this reasoning, but it let light into at least one befogged brain.

The sole surviving outlaw was Abe Tinker, the right hand man of Daniel Rowe, and to whom the jealous lover had freely communicated his suspicions concerning the new recruits.

Thus far, though he could not help seeing that there had been treachery at work, the intense excitement had prevented his reasoning the matter out, but that speech of Hardy Zeph gave him the clew. If they had not set the ball in motion, how could they be so sure that Bald Bisbee had been captured?

He saw it all now, and though he dared not openly charge them with treachery, or attack them, as he longed to do, Abe Tinker made a mental vow to avenge his slaughtered comrades, even though it should cost his own life.

The party pressed on at a rapid pace, their enemies all behind them, since in those days, Missouri was not covered with a network of telegraph wires, and in his desire to fully entrap the bank-robbers, Pierce Ballou had been careful not to let a hint of the truth pass out of the town.

Their horses had been selected for their speed and endurance, and though considerable had been taken out of them during that mad galloping to and fro in the streets of Clayton, Zeph felt confident that they could keep in advance of all pursuit until the friendly shades of night should descend to cover their movements.

Nor was he deceived in this estimate.

Thanks to his thorough knowledge of the country, gained in childhood days, not a single glimpse was obtained of their pursuers while the daylight lasted.

Despite her repeated protestations, it was evident to all that Decoy Duck was failing, that the great loss of blood from her wound was fast undermining her strength, and when the sun set Dainty Lance bade Zeph lead the way to some covert where they could rest in security, at least until the injury could be properly attended to.

"The hoss-critters need it, too!" muttered Tinker, but he had another object than rest in view.

Though reluctantly, Zeph was forced to obey,

and after carefully breaking the trail by entering the bed of a creek and doubling back, the party came to a halt in a thick clump of trees.

Abe Tinker volunteered to care for the jaded horses. Zeph kindled a small fire in the midst of a dense patch of bushes, where the feeble rays would be intercepted by the dense foliage, while Dainty Lance tore strips from his shirt to prepare bandages for dressing the wound.

By this time Decoy Duck was too greatly enfeebled by fatigue and loss of blood to make any resistance, and languidly submitted to having her shoulder laid bare.

Though no bones had been broken by the bullet, the wound was a severe one, and had been irritated by the subsequent ride.

Tenderly as a woman, Dainty Lance washed and bandaged the hurt, coming more nearly to being in love with the fair Decoy than ever before, when he reflected on her courage and fortitude under pain that would have broken down many a stout man.

By his advice, Duck lay down to sleep immediately after her wound was dressed, and as Tinker soon after joined the comrades, it was decided that they should keep alternate watch until midnight, when it was necessary for them to resume their flight.

"Ef we git started then, afore day I kin git ye all to a hole whar we kin lay low ontel the wu'st o' the storm blows over, an' then we kin cross the river an' git into Kansas, whar we'll be safe enough," said Zeph.

Abe Tinker volunteered to keep the first watch, and as neither of the others dreamed of his treacherous intentions, they easily granted his desire, feeling tired and sleepy.

The training of an adventurous life had given them both the power to sleep and wake at will, and despite the peril which still threatened them, in less than ten minutes from the time they lay down, Dainty Lance and Zeph were asleep.

For some time Abe Tinker remained quiet, arguing the matter out of his own mind, but finally decided that an attack upon the traitors, as he regarded them, would be too personally dangerous. Then he arose and silently stole away.

Hardy Zeph was the first to awake, and as he did so he could just catch the sounds of receding hoof-strokes. Then he called cautiously to Tinker, but there was no reply.

CHAPTER XIII.

ALL FOR VENGEANCE.

HARDY ZEPH awoke just a little too late for the good of himself and his companions. He barely heard the distant trampling of horses' hoofs in the instant when his ear touched the ground before he hurriedly sprung to his feet, but that was all. The woods around were silent as death. And when he again pressed his ear to the ground, the tell-tale sounds could no longer be distinguished, leaving him without any guide as to the direction which the traitor had taken.

Abe Tinker had carefully mapped out his course while waiting and watching for a favorable chance to deal his blow.

He knew that his mates were all dead or prisoners, and that they owed their fate principally to Dainty Lance. By solemn oath he was bound to avenge their fate upon their betrayer, and this oath he resolved to keep, even though it involved his own death or captivity.

"She was knowin' to the trick—that's plain enough," he pondered, though drawing an erroneous conclusion in this instance. "She wouldn't be so thick with a traitor, onless. So much the better! He won't be apt to desert her, an' she can't travel fur on that ugly wound."

This brief transcript will show the line of reasoning followed by Tinker, and will account for his running the risk necessary to remove the four horses.

By the exercise of patient cunning, this was finally accomplished, and Abe Tinker was just mounting his own horse, having secured the others so they would lead, when Hardy Zeph caught the sound of his movements.

The outlaw rode direct as possible back to the main road, where he expected to intercept some one of the parties out in pursuit of them. Nor was he disappointed in this hope, though more time was spent than he cared to lose, for he knew that at any moment those whom he had sworn to deliver into the hands of the hangman might awaken, and discovering his absence, would not be long in divining the truth.

"We kin run 'em down easy enough," he muttered, his eyes glowing with a venomous hatred. "I could trail 'em day in an' day out on my knees; I could wade that-a-way through a lake o' burnin' brimstone, but what the boss an' the rest o' the boys shell be avenged!"

Abe Tinker had ridden some five or six miles along the road, heading for Clayton, before he encountered those for whom he was seeking.

Then, even had his heart or courage failed him at the pinch, there was no retreat or faltering, for the soft, sandy road had so deadened the sound of hoof-strokes that he was within fifty yards of a dozen horsemen before he suspected their proximity.

But Abe Tinker did not hesitate. He was one of those men whose brains seem incapable of dealing with more than one question at a time. He knew that his oath bound him to exact vengeance on those who had betrayed him and his, and what might befall himself became a secondary consideration.

"Don't shoot!" he cried, holding both unarmed hands aloft in the clear moonlight, and slowly riding forward, the horsemen having abruptly drawn rein as they caught sight of him. "Don't shoot—I surrender!"

"Come forward and give an account of yourself!" cried a voice so strongly resembling that of Dainty Lance as to cause a cold chill of superstitious terror to agitate the traitor.

Though it seemed impossible, at that moment he believed that Dainty Lance had once again circumvented him, and was here in his front. But a dozen weapons were covering him, and he knew that hesitation would be equivalent to death.

His painful doubts were of brief duration. The difference in clothing told him that the speaker was not Dainty Lance, but Harry Ballou, the banker's son.

"Who and what are you?" was the sharp demand.

"Your pris'ner," coolly responded Tinker, drawing rein as the party closed around him. "I surrender. I hev rid back this hour or more to give myself up."

"One of the band, by the holies!" cried the sheriff, who was in reality the leader of the posse.

"Yes, an' ef you'll foller my advice, you kin ketch the rest—they's only three on 'em," said Tinker, eager to consummate his treachery. "These is tha'r hosses. I slipped away while they was sleepin'. Ef you move lively, you kin pounce onto 'em afore they wake up."

"Look out that he don't lead you into a trap," said Harry Ballou, sternly. "A fellow who would betray his mates like that is capable of anything!"

"Hard words don't break no bones," muttered Tinker, in a dogged tone. "I've got my reasons fer hatin' them as rid these hosses. What they be, don't matter to nobody. I'm willin' to stan' my trial, or be strung up by the Regulators, just so they be thar to keep me comp'ny. Ef I don't lead you to them, then you kin do with me as you see fit."

"And that will be to string you up by the neck to the nearest tree!" vowed the sheriff, eying the bank-robber closely as he spoke.

But the fellow never flinched, and all could see that he was in deadly earnest.

The different horses were recognized as among those ridden by the robbers when the bank was attacked, and this served to confirm the story told by the outlaw.

With a few sharp questions the sheriff gleaned all that he deemed essential to the full understanding of the situation, then placed Abe Tinker under the especial guard of two trustworthy men, with strict orders to blow his brains out at the first suspicion of foul play, then set forward to capture the betrayed trio.

This party, with a few additions, was the same that had captured Hammer Fair and his two fellows inside the bank. That done, they procured horses and set out in pursuit of the fleeing robbers, Harry Ballou joining them for reasons which he was careful to keep to himself.

Dainty Lance had been very explicit in his warning message, and Harry knew that the writer was the young man who so strongly resembled himself, whose life he had vainly pleaded for, in Howard.

Many persons had recognized Dainty Lance among the robbers, and learning this, the banker's son was resolved, if possible, to save his life if he could not his liberty.

With these sentiments, knowing that his "double" was one of the little party which Abe Tinker was betraying, it may be imagined that Harry followed his companions with anything but joy, but great was his secret satisfaction when, after carefully surrounding the spot where the traitor-guide assured them that they would find their game, the party closed in—only to find that the coveted prey had given them the slip!

"They cain't hev gone fur," cried Tinker, fairly foaming at the mouth with mingled rage,

terror and disappointment. "They was afoot, an' one o' them badly wounded—"

"Here's some bloody rags!" cried one of the party.

Perhaps it was just as well for Abe Tinker that this confirmation of his story came as it did, for the man-hunters, disappointed just when they held themselves sure of their game, were eying him in a dangerous manner.

"We can't trail them through the woods—we can do nothing until daylight; and by that time they will have broken their trail and found some hiding-place snug enough to baffle us," said the sheriff, with a curse.

"Zack Bullock don't live far from here," suggested one of the party, but hesitatingly, as though more than half-ashamed of what he hinted.

But the sheriff, who deemed his professional reputation at stake, eagerly seized upon the hint.

"And they say his bloodhounds can trail a shadow or a mink through running water! The very thing! Thompson, your head is worth more than all of ours put together."

"I protest against such an outrage on humanity!" cried Harry indignantly, but the sheriff bluntly interrupted his further speech:

"Protest and be—blessed, Harry Ballou. I am in command here, and do not take my orders from you. I mean to capture those rascals, and if it can't be done by men alone, then I'll use dogs. If you don't like the idea, you can go your own way—that's flat!"

The general sentiment was against him, and when a man was dispatched to secure the aid of Zack Bullock and his trained bloodhounds—trained to hunt runaway negroes through the Southern swamps, the banker's son, feeling heartsick and discouraged, leaped upon his horse and rode away from the spot.

While awaiting the return of the messenger sent after the man-hunters and his four-footed allies, the sheriff was not idle. The smoldering embers were blown into a flame, light-wood torches were manufactured, and by their aid, search was made for the trail of the fugitives.

This was soon found, though none of the present party, if Abe Tinker be excepted, were greatly skilled in woodcraft. But they managed to make out the general direction taken by the fugitives, and saw that there were three different sets of footprints. Thus far the story told by the prisoner was confirmed.

An hour later, the messenger returned, accompanied by Zack Bullock, a short, heavy-set man whose huge nose, retreating forehead and chin gave him a startling resemblance to the brace of bloodhounds which he held in leash.

The dogs were set upon the trail.

God help the fugitives now!

CHAPTER XIV.

ALL FOR LOVE.

ALMOST by instinct Zeph Hardy divined the truth, but before awakening his companions, he verified the startling suspicions that had found birth in distant hoof-strokes.

"I knowed it," he muttered, in a hard, ugly tone as he found the spot where their horses had been tethered was now vacant. "The halters

was untied, an' the critters led away, one by one. 'Twas that Tinker cuss—but *why?* That's the p'int that bothers me!"

It was an enigma that might have puzzled a keener brain than that of the boy-trapper, or any one ignorant of the manner in which Abe Tinker had worked out his dogged suspicions.

Hardy Zeph did not waste any time over the perplexing question, only pausing long enough to make sure that the animals had not broken loose and wandered away of their own accord, then hastened to where Dainty Lance lay, rousing him from a deep and refreshing slumber.

"The devil to pay an' no pitch hot!" he muttered. "Horses gone, an' Abe Tinker gone with 'em!"

Dainty Lance stared at him in speechless amazement, unable to believe the evidence of his ears. Just as Zeph before him, he could not understand why the bank-robber should desert them after such a manner, when he was almost totally ignorant of the country around him. And not only that, but incumber himself with three led horses.

"It's the truth," added Zeph. "He's levanted, takin' the hosses an' leavin' us here afoot."

"But *why?*" persisted Dainty Lance, vainly striving to see a ray of light through the muddle.

"Because he knows that you betrayed his mates to death and captivity," came a low, solemn voice from out the gloom.

Both instantly recognized the voice. The speaker was none other than Decoy Duck, who had been aroused from her slumbers by the sound of their voices.

She now came forward and confronted the friends, who stood before her more like criminals than honest men.

"I am not blaming you," she added, with a simple dignity that became her even better than her usual manner. "You acted as you deemed right. We forced you into this sad business, and have no right to complain because you fought and defeated us with our own weapons."

Dainty Lance muttered something, he himself scarcely knew what, but the little hand of Decoy Duck was pressed over his lips.

"The less said the soonest mended," she spoke, quickly. "You acted according to your ideas of right. You tried your best to keep me from entering the snare, and I thank you for that. I didn't understand it then, but I do now."

"You remember what you said about Bald Bisbee being captured? That enlightened me, as it did Abe Tinker, and cleared up more than one perplexing point. For it was plain that somebody had betrayed our plans. A foolish passion made me blind to the truth, I suppose, until that speech opened my eyes."

"You don't know Abe Tinker as well as I do. He feels sure that you set the enemy upon us, and he will have revenge, even if it costs him his life. For that reason he has left us afoot. He will seek out some of our pursuers and lead them back here."

"Then the sooner we set out the better!" cried Dainty Lance, more like his usual self. "Zeph, we trust it all to you. Is there no snug hiding-place near?"

"Good-by, then!" uttered Decoy Duck, with a visible struggle to choke down her growing emotion. "I am wounded and weak. I would only prove a clog on your movements. Leave me here and save yourselves—"

"If I do, may I be forever scorched!" cried Lance, hotly. "It has been an unlucky business all through, and, though I don't see how I could have acted otherwise, I feel like a treacherous cur. Don't make my remorse any sharper by urging me to play the coward as well."

"Better one should be captured than all three."

"We kin give 'em the slip ef we don't lose too much time a-jawin'," said Zeph, shortly.

"Your lot shall be ours, dear Myrtle," muttered Lance, feeling his heart throbbing with something not far akin from love. "Come—lean on me. Lead on, Zeph!"

That tender title, the first that had ever been addressed to her in earnest by Dainty Lance, broke down the resolution which Decoy Duck had formed, and as his right arm stole around her waist, a faint sob parted her lips, and she yielded to the will of the youth whom she loved so madly—because hopelessly.

If not pleased by this positive declaration, Hardy Zeph kept his dissatisfaction to himself for the time being at least, and led the way in a direction almost parallel with the road along which Abe Tinker was then hastening. Their faces were turned toward the same point of the compass, for Zeph, now that they were forced to depend upon their own powers of locomotion, knew that their only chance lay in finding some snug hiding-place where they might lay low until the first fury of the death-hunt had passed by. For this reason he was doubling back, striking for the "cave region."

Her wound and consequent loss of blood had seriously weakened Decoy Duck, though she concealed this fact from her companions as well as she could, pressing on with a courage that was really extraordinary. But as the hours crept along, and mile after mile was placed behind them, Dainty Lance could not help noticing that her steps were beginning to drag, and that she bore her weight more and more heavily upon his arm.

Life was very sweet to him, yet, despite the fact that all his trouble had been brought upon him through the agency of Decoy Duck; Lance was resolved not to abandon her in his extremity. So when her limbs suddenly gave way, and she, in a feeble voice, bade him leave her and save himself, he flatly refused.

"How much further is it, Zeph, to the hiding-place you have in view?" he added, turning toward the boy trapper.

"A good dozen miles," came the discouraging response.

"Then we must make a litter—"

"Or else git a hoss fer her to ride," interrupted Zeph, a little sourly for him. "It'd be powerful nasty travelin' with a litter 'long the way we've got to go to break our trail. A hoss would be best, ef she could ride."

"We can tie her on, or I could hold her in my arms," said Dainty Lance; then adding, gloomily: "but why mention such a thing? We have no horse—"

"That ain't sayin' we cain't git one," chuckled Zeph. "I know whar thar's hosses, ef they hain't bin pressed into sarvice to chase us. You mought be makin' some sort o' litter while I go an' see. Ef the hosses should be gone, then thar won't be so much time lost."

"Be cautious, then. Remember that we are strangers here, and that our lives depend on you."

Zeph promised to bear the warning in mind, then stole rapidly away, while Dainty Lance set about cutting the sticks necessary to form a narrow litter.

"Better not waste the time," answered Decoy Duck. "I feel that I shall never see the sun rise again. Nor am I sorry. All are gone—I am alone in the world."

Dainty Lance attempted to utter a few words of consolation, but a low, bitter laugh from the girl silenced him.

He knew that she felt the words came only from his tongue, not from the heart, and he said no more, but bent his every energy to preparing the litter.

This consumed time, since the light of the moon was shut out by the dense foliage overhead, but the job was done before anything was heard of Hardy Zeph.

Just as Dainty Lance approached the spot where Decoy Duck was resting, a sound came to their ears that caused their blood to thrill and fairly curdle in their veins—the deep, ringing bay of a bloodhound upon a hot scent!

Instinct rather than reason told them that this trail was theirs—that the enemy were hunting them surely to death.

For a moment Dainty Lance was paralyzed, but then his wonted courage returned, and he raised the trembling girl in his arms despite her feeble resistance. Bearing her thus, he plunged through the darkness with an energy born of despair, hoping to soon reach some running water where he might break his trail sufficiently to delay their terrible pursuers until a safe covert could be reached.

But fate seemed against them. They encountered no stream, and Dainty Lance, strong though he was, felt himself gradually failing beneath the burden he bore.

"Leave me—save yourself!" murmured Decoy Duck.

"We settled that question before," panted Lance, doggedly. "We will share the same fate—live or die together."

He no longer thought of escape by flight, for the regular baying of the bloodhounds told him that the animals were going two yards to his one. His only hope was in killing them before the human enemy could come up, and with that forlorn hope he was seeking a favorable spot for standing at bay.

Luckily this was soon found; a small glade where the moonlight fell upon the ground almost as clearly as day.

Here, if the bounds were running in advance, as he believed from their rapid progress, he might be able to slay them in time to resume his flight and escape in the darkness that reigned around the glade.

The delay was brief—barely long enough for the young adventurer to steady his nerves suffi-

ciently to handle his pistol with certainty—then a long, dark shape glided out into the moonlight, uttering its terribly musical note as it headed direct for the hidden fugitives.

With nerves as steady and true as steel, Dainty Lance covered the hound and fired. A wild howl, and the animal fell dead, while its mate sprang over its quivering body, uncowed, yelling like a veritable fiend!

Two shots that sounded as one, and the ferocious creature dropped at their feet, dead ere its body touched the ground.

Loud, angry shouts came from the forest beyond, telling the fugitives that a no less terrible enemy was near.

Dainty Lance clasped Decoy Duck in his arms, and would have raised her up to resume their flight, but she repulsed him, crying:

"Alone, you can escape; together, we must both die! Leave me—I pray you, save yourself!"

Dainty Lance uttered an impetuous refusal.

"Then kiss me—only once—do not refuse—no one need ever know how you sullied your honest lips. Kiss me!"

Scarce knowing what he did, Dainty Lance obeyed, pressing his cold lips to hers, wondering at the strange request.

"Thank you, and God bless you!" the strange girl murmured, then slipped from his arms. "Remember—I loved you!"

The moment these words were uttered, Decoy Duck raised her revolver, placed the muzzle between her teeth, and sent a bullet crashing up through her brain!

Without a sigh or moan, she sunk down, dead!

And Dainty Lance knew that she had taken her own life, that he might the more surely escape from his enemies.

CHAPTER XV.

A DEBT OF GRATITUDE CANCELED.

FOR a few moments Dainty Lance stood like one suddenly turned to stone. He could hardly believe the evidence of his own senses. But an instant before, her lips were touching his in a clinging, passionate pressure—he could still feel the tender yet fiery touch—and now! dead—slain by her own hand, rather than live longer a clog upon his motions! She had given her life to increase his chances of escape.

In that horrible moment Dainty Lance felt like a murderer—as though his hand had held the weapon that cut short this thread of life—and with a sobbing groan he sunk upon his knees beside the body of the suicide, raising her head and shoulders to his breast, in the wild, vain hope that she was not yet dead.

True to her sex even in that dire extremity, Decoy Duck, while doing her deadly work most thoroughly, had so arranged it that her beauty should not be marred by the death-wound she had inflicted upon herself.

Death had been instantaneous, the bullet passing up through the roof of her mouth, through the brain and making its exit amid the short, curling hair of her head.

There was a smile upon her face, and in her half-closed eyes. She looked like one in a walking dream, and though he could not help know-

ing that she was dead, to Dainty Lance it seemed as though she was just about to speak to him.

The man-hunters, hearing the fierce yells of the bloodhounds and the rapid firing, followed by the single shot, knew that their game was run down, and strained every nerve to reach the scene.

All except the owner of the bloodhounds had followed the trail on horseback, and, guided by the confused noises, they spurred on at a reckless pace, soon plunging through the fringe of undergrowth into the open glade.

Dainty Lance had not attempted to flee—had not given his own peril a single thought since Decoy Duck fell dead at his feet—but now, as the man-hunters crashed into the opening, almost riding over him he raised his head, motioning them back as he sternly cried:

"Hold! there has been enough bloodshed—"

"Harry Ballou!" exclaimed the sheriff, who was foremost, and making a very natural mistake as the clear rays of the moon fell full upon the upturned face of the speaker. "You here! where are the others? who is that you have there?"

At the sound of those words, Dainty Lance suddenly became himself again, for they told him that all might not yet be lost, should he play his cards boldly.

He eagerly grasped the chance offered him by the unconscious sheriff, and made quick reply:

"Gone—fled just a moment after I came upon them."

He was interrupted by a volley of furious curses from the lips of Zeph Bullock, as that worthy bent over the dead bodies of his four-footed allies.

This explosion attracted the attention of the sheriff, and during the few moments of respite thus afforded him, Dainty Lance devised a plausible account to give of the tragedy.

He had barely thought this out when the sheriff once more turned toward him, though it was plain that not the remotest suspicion of the truth entered his mind.

"How did you stumble upon them, Harry? Did they shoot the dogs? You killed that fellow?"

"It was the yelping of the hounds that first aroused my suspicions of the truth," said Dainty Lance, speaking slowly, afraid alike lest he should say too much or too little. "From the sounds I knew that they must be near, and so I struck across to cut them off. I came up too late to save the dogs, but catching a glimpse of the three fugitives, just as they started to resume their flight, I fired at them, and this one fell. The others darted into the timber, but I never gave them another thought, for in the one scream of agony that this—that the person I shot uttered as she fell—"

"She!" interrupted the sheriff, incredulously.

"Yes—a woman in disguise—and I murdered her!"

There was no feigning in the groan of bitter remorse that accompanied this speech, for at that moment Dainty Lance did indeed feel that the death of poor, misguided Myrtle Fair rested upon his soul.

Nor were the man-hunters unaffected. They could have looked upon the death of a score of

men such as those they had believed themselves hunting down, but this was different. A woman—young and beautiful, as the clear moonbeams showed—that was a very different matter.

They gathered around in awe-stricken silence, and even Abe Tinker, believing as he did that Decoy Duck had been a party to the treachery which had annihilated the band, felt his eyes growing dim, and a large lump swelling larger in his throat as he gazed down upon the inanimate form of his once idolized young mistress.

Doubtless it was well for Dainty Lance that the suspicious old bank-robber was so wholly taken up with the mournful spectacle, else the eyes of hatred and vengeance might have rectified the mistake made by the sheriff. And once let the question be raised, and the difference in the dress worn by Dainty Lance from that of the genuine Harry Ballou must soon reveal the startling truth.

Life is sweet to one still young and active, and despite his remorse over the sad fate of Decoy Duck, these thoughts occurred to Lance, and he noiselessly edged away from the crowd, avoiding all appearance of flight, but soon reaching the darkness which surrounded the glade.

At that instant, a dark form arose before him, and a low voice uttered cautiously:

"Don't start or utter a word, but hear me. I am a friend, and would serve you."

Dainty Lance, despite the gloom, managed to recognize the speaker—none other than the young man whom he had so recently been personating—*Harry Ballou*!

"I heard how they mistook you for me, out yonder, and so I lay low. I—and my father—owe you a debt greater than we can ever hope to repay in this life. You sent us that warning, and thus saved us from ruin, for such a bold assault would surely have succeeded had we not been forewarned in time.

"It was in hopes of doing you a service that I joined in the pursuit. I left them when they set the bloodhounds at work, but followed the baying, resolved to defend your life, if it need be, with my own. I came here—I heard them mistake you for me, and so watched for a chance to speak to you without any one else hearing my words.

"I will carry on the part you began. My horse is only a few rods away. Take it and save yourself. And wherever you go, you will have our prayers for your safety, and future well-being."

It was impossible for Dainty Lance to doubt the truth or sincerity of the young man while these words were being uttered. Each sentence carried conviction with it. And when Harry ceased speaking the hands of the two youths met in a warm and fervent pressure.

"If you heard—you must know who it was that died out yonder," muttered Dainty Lance, a choking sensation in his throat rendering his words indistinct. "She shot herself, because she would not be a hindrance to my flight. I could not prevent her, she did it so suddenly. I should like to remember that—that her body—"

"I pledge you my word of honor that all respect shall be shown her remains. They shall

have Christian burial, and the spot where they rest, so marked that you can find it, if ever you come into these parts again."

"Some time I will thank you for this—I cannot now," said Dainty Lance, speaking with difficulty. "Her name was Myrtle—that will be enough."

"The stone shall be so marked. But come. There is danger in lingering here. Let me show you where my horse is hidden. You must ride fast and far. I will keep this band off the right track, but there are others scouring the country. God grant you may escape them as easily!"

In silence Dainty Lance followed his generous "double" and soon stood beside the horse alluded to.

At the same moment he heard the cautious signal that told him Hardy Zeph was close at hand and ready to aid him in case of need.

Telling Harry Ballou as much, they parted, after one more fervent hand-clasp; then Lance hastened to rejoin Zeph.

The boy trapper had succeeded in stealing one horse, and would have secured more, had he not been alarmed by the baying of the bloodhounds. Divining the truth, he made all haste along the back-trail, arriving just as Harry Ballou made over the horse.

Proceeding cautiously until beyond all danger of being heard by the enemy, the fugitives made the most of the remaining hours of night, and just as the sun arose they reached a small but unusually snug cave, where, as they had taken good care to thoroughly break their trail, they felt that they could lie in safety until the worst of the storm blew over.

Nor were they mistaken. A week passed, during which they neither saw nor heard anything of a human being besides each other, save when Zeph ventured forth in the night time for the purpose of securing food.

At the end of that time they left their retreat, and by riding hard all night, were out of the country before day dawned. Resting in a secure covert all that day, the succeeding night carried them safely out of the State.

"We are outlawed there," said Dainty Lance, looking back across the river. "We were led into crime through my folly in playing with edged tools. But, thank God! there is plenty of room for us all, between here and sunset!"

"Ef thar ain't, we kin make it, I reckon," laughed Hardy Zeph.

Only a few words are needed in conclusion.

Harry Ballou was finally married to Rose Harvey, and admitted as a full partner into the bank which was so nearly robbed by Hammer Fair and his gang.

That personage, with Abe Tinker and the two others, were tried, found guilty, and sentenced to hard labor for life.

The unfortunate "Decoy Duck" was buried as Harry promised, in consecrated ground, with "MYRTLE" on her tombstone.

Harry and his wife often wondered who Dainty Lance really was, but it was years before they solved the mystery.

In due time, the reader may be made as wise as they.

THE END.

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